time, but later became a legend: the rising on 26 and 27 April 1985 of Soviet and Afghan army prisoners of war held in the prison-fortress of Badaber, just south of Peshawar in Pakistan.

Badaber had been home from 1958 to 1970 to a US Air Force secret intelligence listening post, the 6937th Communications Group. It was from there that secret missions were flown by U2 reconnaissance aircraft into the Soviet Union, whose frontier was only two hundred miles away. Gary Powers took off from Badaber on the ill-fated flight which ended when he was shot down on 1 May 1961 over Sverdlovsk, deep inside the Soviet Union, thus triggering off a major East–West crisis.

During the war the fortress at Badaber was used for the storage of arms and ammunition, and as a training base for the fighters from Burhanuddin Rabbani's Jamiat-i Islami. According to Rabbani, the base was entirely under his control: the Pakistan government did not attempt to interfere with what went on there. From 1983 Soviet and Afghan government prisoners were taken there to work in the ammunition stores and in the nearby quarries. They were kept in underground prison buildings – *zindands*. In 1985 there were about twelve Soviet prisoners there – most of whom had been captured by Masud's men in the Pandsher Valley – and forty Afghan government soldiers and policemen. The men were worked very hard and the non-Muslims among them were given Muslim names as a preliminary to their conversion. It was by these names that their guards addressed them and by which they were expected to address one another.

At about six o'clock on the afternoon of Friday 26 April, so the story goes, most of the mujahedin guards were at prayer on the drill square. Only two were left to guard the prisoners. They were overpowered by a particularly powerful Ukrainian named Viktor Dukhovchenko (whose Muslim name was Yunos) and placed in the custody of one of the Afghan prisoners and a Soviet prisoner called Mohamed Islam. The other prisoners then broke into the armoury and seized the weapons. Their original plan was to make a break for freedom. But at this point the remaining guards were alerted by Mohamed Islam. They surrounded the compound and prevented the captives from escaping. The prisoners then barricaded themselves into the armoury, setting up heavy machine guns and mortars on the roof. Detachments of mujahedin and Pakistani army units including tanks and artillery were brought up, but their initial attempts to recapture the fortress were repelled.

Rabbani arrived at the base in the late evening to negotiate with the insurgents, promising them their lives if they surrendered. They demanded instead that they should be allowed to see the ambassadors of the Soviet Union and Afghanistan, and representatives of the Red Cross. They threatened to blow up the armoury if their demands were not met.

Rabbani rejected these demands. He narrowly missed being killed by a rocket fired by the insurgents and some of his bodyguards were seriously hurt. The following morning he ordered an all-out attack on the fort, supported by rocket artillery, tanks, and helicopters. The outcome was never in doubt, but it was determined when the armoury blew up and the prison was practically destroyed. Some say the building exploded when it was struck by an incoming shell; others that the insurgents blew it up themselves. Three of the insurgents survived, badly wounded. They were finished off with grenades. The explosion destroyed many of the attackers as well: some Russian accounts claim that 120 mujahedin were killed, along with up to ninety Pakistani regular soldiers and six American instructors.[25] The story later circulated that Soviet special forces were preparing to free the captives when the tragedy occurred.

The following day Gulbeddin Hekmatyar, the most extreme of the mujahedin leaders, issued an order to his men that in future no Russians were to be taken prisoner.

Neither the Soviet nor the Pakistani government had any interest in publicising these events. The Soviets were still maintaining that the 'Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces in Afghanistan' was not engaged in war; the presence of Soviet prisoners of war in far-distant Pakistan could not be reconciled with that bland line. The Pakistanis were equally maintaining the fiction that they were giving no assistance to the mujahedin: they sealed off the area of the prison and neither journalists nor foreigners were allowed near the place. An issue of the Peshawar newspaper *Safir*, which had carried a report of the incident, was destroyed.

Despite the official reticence, the news did seep out, but the details remained fragmentary and disputed. Some of the Afghan prisoners escaped in the confusion, eventually made their way home, and were able to provide the only direct accounts of what had happened. An American satellite is said to have transmitted a photograph on 28 April showing that the training camp had been destroyed by an explosion which had left a crater eighty yards across. The American radio station Voice of America reported on 4 May that twelve Soviet and twelve Afghan prisoners had been killed in the blast. The electronic intelligence branch of the 40th Army picked up exchanges between the Pakistani helicopters and their base. On 9 May an official of the International Red Cross informed the Soviet Embassy in Islamabad that there had been a rising in the camp. On 27 May the Soviet news agency *Novosti* reported, 'Kabul. Popular meetings are continuing across the country in protest against the death in an uneven fight with the counter-revolutionaries and regular units of the Pakistan army of Soviet and Afghan soldiers kidnapped by the rebels on the territory of the DRA [Democratic Republic of Afghanistan] and secretly transferred to Pakistan. Peasants, workers, and representatives of the tribes are angrily condemning the barbaric action of Islamabad, which is crudely distorting the facts in a clumsy attempt to evade responsibility.'

The records of the prison camp were destroyed in the explosion, and so there was no reliable list of names of those prisoners who had died. Confusion was compounded because such lists as existed gave only the Muslim names of the prisoners, and their original names could only be reconstructed on the basis of fragmentary evidence. After the war was over the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), the GRU and the Veterans Committee of the Commonwealth of Independent States all made it their business to piece the story together. The first breakthrough did not come until December 1991, when a delegation led by Rabbani visited Moscow to persuade the new Russian government to cut off aid to the Communist government of President Najibullah. The mujahedin refused to negotiate on prisoners until they had received satisfaction on the main issue. They insisted that, in so far as there were any Soviet prisoners in their hands, they were guests and free to return home or go elsewhere as they pleased. But a Pakistani Deputy Foreign Minister with the delegation gave the names of five of the Soviet soldiers believed to have perished at Badaber.[26]

Badaber was visited in 1992 by Zamir Kabulov from the Russian Embassy in Islamabad, who subsequently became Russian Ambassador in Kabul. The search was given a renewed impulse in 2003, thanks to the efforts of the Veterans Committee under General Aushev. Over the years seven names were established fairly securely: several were awarded posthumous medals for valour. Applications for awards on behalf of three others, Igor Vaskov, Nikolai Didkin, and Sergei Levchishin, were turned down by the Russian Ministry of Defence in 2002 because the evidence was insufficient.

One mother continued to hope that her son would return, long after all reasonable grounds for hope were gone. Alexander Zverkovich was an apprentice welder in Minsk in Belorussia when he was called up in 1983. In March 1984 his mother, Sofia, heard from his commander that he had gone 'missing in action while carrying out his military duties'. Even before the Soviet Union collapsed, she went with other mothers of missing soldiers to Moscow to ask the authorities to help find their sons and bring home those who had survived as prisoners of war; but without result. In the mid-1990s she appealed to the courts to rule that her son was dead, so that she could receive the benefits to which she was entitled. But in 2006 her hopes were revived when she learned that her son had participated in the rising in Badaber. 'They say a monument has been put up in Moscow to those who took part in the rising,' she told her local newspaper. 'The radio said that some of them survived. Some people in the village even said that they had seen Sashenka [Alexander] on the television ... I've even been to fortune-tellers. Some say he died; others maintain that he is alive and living beyond the ocean. I'd give anything to know the truth, however bitter it was.' Alexander Zverkovich's name is one of the seven on the list of those who died at Badaber.

The whole truth – even the names of those who died – may never be known for sure. The Pakistani intelligence authorities refused to release whatever documents they may have had, and other accounts of the tragedy were based on circumstance, hearsay, and wishful thinking.[27]

- TWELVE -

# THE ROAD TO THE BRIDGE

Within weeks of sending the troops into Afghanistan, the Politburo was already talking about how to get them out again. After visiting Kabul in February 1980, Andropov reported that the situation was becoming more stable, although the Afghan government needed to overcome their domestic dissensions, improve the fighting capacity of their army, and strengthen their links with the people. Ustinov was cautious: it would be a year, or even two, before the troops could be withdrawn. Brezhnev agreed; and suggested that it might even be necessary to increase the numbers somewhat. Gromyko thought it would be prudent first to seek guarantees of Afghanistan's security from China, Pakistan, and others.[1]

The caution was entirely justified. The massive popular demonstrations in Kabul in late February, and the action which the 40th Army took to bring them under control, demonstrated beyond a doubt that the situation in Afghanistan was not stable at all. Major military operations started almost immediately in the Kunar Valley and in the Pandsher.

*Brezhnev Looks for a Way Out*

It took some time before the Soviet leaders were willing to recognise that their hope for a quick exit was vain. Brezhnev told the French President, Giscard d'Estaing, in May 1980 that he knew that the troops would have to leave: 'I will make it my personal business to impose a political solution. You can count on me.' A month later he ordered the withdrawal of units which were no longer needed in Afghanistan and told Andropov to discuss the details with Karmal.[2] In the winter of 1980–81 the Soviet Ambassador in Islamabad talked with the Pakistani President, Zia ul-Haq (1924–88), about the possibility of talks under the auspices of the United Nations. Ustinov, once a hawk, began to have serious doubts, and wrote to the Politburo saying that no military solution to the war was possible, and it was necessary to find a political and diplomatic way out.[3] Andropov, too, had lost his appetite for foreign adventures: when the Polish crisis blew up later in 1980, he said, 'The quota of interventions abroad has been exhausted.'[4] In the autumn of 1981 he and Ustinov sponsored a paper by the Foreign Ministry proposing proximity talks between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Andropov succeeded Brezhnev in November 1982. At Brezhnev's funeral he assured Zia ul-Haq of the 'Soviet side's new flexible policy and its willingness to bring an early solution to the crisis.'[5] The only condition was that Pakistan stop its aid to the mujahedin. By then Gromyko had already chaired an interdepartmental meeting on plans for a Soviet withdrawal.

In February 1983 Andropov told the Secretary General of the UN with considerable force that the Soviet Union had no intention of keeping its troops in Afghanistan indefinitely. The operation was expensive; the Soviet Union had plenty of domestic problems; and the war had complicated the Soviet Union's relationships with the United States, the Third World, and the Islamic world. Speaking very slowly and emphasising each word, he added that he sincerely wanted 'to put an end to this situation'. The argument, commonly bandied about in the West, that Soviet troops had never withdrawn from any country where they had once been stationed was disproved by history. But others were interfering in Afghanistan's affairs. 'Soviet troops would have to stay for as long as necessary because this is a matter which concerns the security of the Soviet Union's southern border.'[6]

Andropov's good intentions were undermined by his own failing

health and by the shooting down by Soviet fighters of a Korean airliner on 1 September 1983, which led immediately to further worldwide condemnation of the Soviet Union for what President Reagan called a 'massacre'. His efforts ran out of steam even before he died in January 1984.

His successor, Konstantin Chernenko, was also seriously ill and barely able to take a grip on policy. He died on 10 March 1985. By now it was obvious to the senior Soviet politicians that the Soviet system was not working as it should. Within hours of Chernenko's death they elected Mikhail Gorbachev as his successor, because he was young, energetic, imaginative, and – they believed – orthodox.

*Gorbachev Moves*

Gorbachev came to power determined to press ahead for a solution in Afghanistan. As a first step he requested a policy review from the Committee on Afghanistan, which was told to look into 'the consequences, pluses, and minuses of a withdrawal'. Later he decided that this committee of old men was a brake on progress and abolished it.[7]

Some Western accounts said that Gorbachev gave the generals a year to finish the job by military means, and that in 1985–6 the pace of the fighting was increased to the highest level of the war. Kryuchkov, always a hostile witness, claimed that Gorbachev first criticised the Ministry of Defence for not prosecuting the war more energetically, but soon swung to the other extreme.[8] There were of course some major military operations in 1985, notably the Kunar offensive in May–June. The Special Forces Brigade was introduced in the same year, as the Russians moved away from massive ground operations towards more flexible actions in support of the Afghan army, backed where necessary by long-range bombers from Soviet territory. But Soviet casualties peaked in the period before Gorbachev came to power and began to fall from May 1985 onwards. That is hardly compatible with a 'Gorbachev surge'.[9]

Whatever the truth of the story, Gorbachev made up his mind well before the year had expired. In October 1985 he summoned Babrak Karmal to Moscow and raised the prospect of Soviet withdrawal. Karmal was shocked to realise that the Russians needed him less than he needed them. He went white and said, 'If you withdraw the troops now, next time you will have to send in a million.'[10] Gorbachev told him that Afghanistan would have to be able to defend itself by the summer of 1986. The Soviet Union would no longer help with troops, though it would continue to supply military equipment. Karmal should forget about socialism, share power with others, including the mujahedin leaders and others who were now his enemies, and restore the rights of religion and the religious leaders.

Anatoli Chernyaev, the former Party official whom Gorbachev had appointed as his diplomatic adviser earlier in the year, commented in his diary, 'Ten of our boys are dying every day. The people are disenchanted and ask: How long are our troops going to remain there? And when will the Afghans learn to defend themselves? The main thing is that there is no popular base, and without that no revolution can defend itself. What's recommended is a sharp U-turn, back to free capitalism, to Afghan and Islamic values, to a real division of power with the opposition and even with the enemy ... I advised that a compromise should be sought even with the leaders of the mujahedin, and of course with the emigration. Will Karmal go that far? Above all, is he capable, is he sufficiently in command of the situation, for his present enemies to go to meet him?'[11]

Gorbachev now made clear to the Politburo that he was determined to grasp the nettle. Deliberately playing on his listeners' emotions, he read out letters received in the Central Committee from the parents of those who had died.[12] Many were signed. Women spoke of the moral as well as the physical damage being done to their sons. Officers, and even one general, said that they were no longer able to explain to their men what the war was about. Soldiers complained that, because of the press restrictions, the newspapers were reporting that all the fighting was being done by the Afghan army, which was the opposite of the truth. 'In whose name are we in Afghanistan? Do the Afghans themselves want us to do our "international duty" in their country? Is it worth the lives of our boys, who don't understand what they are fighting for? What are you doing, throwing young recruits against professional killers and gangsters? You people in the Politburo made a mistake, and it is up to you to put it right – the sooner the better, while every day

sees more casualties.' The Politburo agreed with Gorbachev's conclusion that the object of Soviet policy should now be to build up the Afghan state and leave.[13]

Gorbachev went public in February 1986, when he told the delegates to the XXVIIth Party Congress in Moscow that the Soviet troops would leave once a political solution had been negotiated which left Afghanistan as a friendly, independent, and non-aligned state, with guarantees against external interference in its affairs.

Although the war was by now increasingly unpopular among the people and the military, it was not of course enough for Gorbachev simply to take the decision to leave. He had also to face up to a difficult problem of domestic politics which has puzzled other nations finding themselves in similar circumstances. How could the Russians withdraw their army safely, with honour, without looking as if they were simply cutting and running, and without appearing to betray their Afghan allies or their own soldiers who had died? The 40th Army had not been defeated on the battlefield; but how was the obvious blow to the prestige of the Soviet Union and its army to be avoided?

Moreover, Gorbachev had to persuade the other parties to the war – the mujahedin, eternally warring among themselves but determined to get rid of the godless Communists in Kabul; the Pakistanis, who wanted to see a friendly Islamist government there; and the Americans, many of whom wished to wipe out the memory of defeat in Vietnam by making the Russians pay the highest possible price in blood and humiliation, at whatever cost in Russian, or indeed Afghan, lives. It is not surprising that the negotiations went on much longer than Gorbachev had envisaged.

The first need was to beef up the Afghan government. The Russians had lost faith in Babrak Karmal: they found him weak, indecisive, and increasingly addicted to drink. In April 1986 they decided that he must go. Gorbachev called on him in a Kremlin hospital where he was being treated for kidney trouble, but failed to get him to leave quietly. Karmal returned to Kabul in a huff and on 1 May Kryuchkov was sent to have another go at him. Their first meeting was interrupted by a noisy street demonstration of support for Karmal. Kryuchkov said coldly that he knew perfectly well how such demonstrations were organised and within five minutes the demonstrators had dispersed. On that visit Kryuchkov got nowhere. But he returned to Kabul a few days later and, after twenty solid hours of persuasion, Karmal finally agreed to resign.[14] The reason given publicly was that he was suffering from ill-health, a line which was somewhat dented when the Soviet doctors, who had not been properly briefed, reported that his health was fine.[15] He was replaced by the younger and more effective Najibullah, the head of the secret police, the KhAD. Karmal hung on as President, without effective power, until Najibullah was elected to the post in November 1986. He then went to Moscow – ostensibly for medical treatment, but actually into permanent exile – and died there a decade later.

Najibullah was not without his critics. A GRU analysis of April 1986 showed, once again, the divergence of views between parts of the Soviet military, who favoured the Khalq faction and their officers in the army, and the KGB, who favoured the Parcham faction represented by Karmal and Najibullah. Speculating on rumours that Najibullah might succeed Karmal, the GRU analysts said that Afghan politicians regarded him as a strong personality. But they feared the power he had exercised through the KhAD, which he had exploited for his own purposes, and whose brutalities he had done nothing to mitigate. Under his regime, the Pul-i Charkhi prison had filled up with Khalqists. He was notoriously a Pushtun nationalist. He was regularly accused of allowing theft, bribery, and corruption on a scale previously unknown. The GRU were not at all sure of his loyalty to the Soviet Union: he had not studied there and, unlike many other Afghan Communist leaders, he had no military experience. The GRU concluded, 'He will not be able to unite the party, the army, and the people to bring about peace.'[16]

These views were not shared by General Varennikov, the most senior soldier in Afghanistan at the time. Najibullah's candidature was also favoured by Kryuchkov. His Pushtun nationalism undermined his ability to persuade the Tajiks and others of the virtues of his Policy of National Reconciliation – an inability which was to prove fatal in the civil war which followed the Soviet withdrawal. But there were no other obvious candidates. And whatever Najibullah's weaknesses, most

observers, then and since, agreed that he had many of the qualities of an effective leader: he was able, energetic, willing to try new ideas, and a good public speaker. Kryuchkov and Shevardnadze, the Soviet Foreign Minister, became his particular advocates in Moscow, and were strongly critical of the way he was eventually abandoned by the Soviet and later the Russian regime. Their commitment to Najibullah led to many conflicts within the Politburo in the last year of the war.

But however able Najibullah was as a leader, the real power had still not shifted sufficiently. The bloated body of Soviet advisers in Afghanistan – two and a half thousand of them in 1986 – continued to get in Najibullah's way. 'We're still doing everything ourselves,' complained Gorbachev. 'That's all our people know how to do. They've tied Najibullah hand and foot.' Gorbachev grumbled that Tabeev, the Soviet Ambassador, was acting like a governor general, telling Najibullah that it was he who had made him General Secretary.[17] Tabeev was recalled in July 1986. But despite his determination that the Afghans should take responsibility for their own fate, even Gorbachev could not resist trying to micromanage Afghan politics. And the Russians soon began to have doubts about Najibullah too. 'It's difficult to build a new building out of old material,' Gorbachev remarked to the Politburo. 'I hope to God that we haven't made a mistake with Najibullah.'

The problem was that Najibullah's aims were almost diametrically opposed to those of the Russians. It was in his interest, by fair means or foul, to get the Soviet soldiers to remain. For how else were he and his government to survive once they left, as the rebels got stronger and his own forces teetered on the brink of dissolution? He accepted that some negotiation and compromise with the opposition side was unavoidable: his Policy of National Reconciliation was designed to bring moderate representatives of the political opposition and the mullahs into government. But Najibullah was determined that the PDPA should keep the key political and administrative posts, including the ministries of Defence, Internal Affairs and Security; and he was unwilling to cooperate with non-Pushtun politicians. This was not all that different from the policy which Karmal had attempted to pursue. Najibullah pursued it with greater energy and was more willing to try to win over the mujahedin commanders. But the rebels



were as suspicious of him as of his predecessor, and his olive branch found few takers.

Many Russians no longer cared much about the composition of the government in Kabul anyway. For them the most important thing was to create a respectable cover for withdrawal, in the meanwhile cutting down the scope of military operations and reducing casualties to a minimum.[18] The Soviet generals were not too happy about that. They had a war to fight and the restrictions which were now placed on them went against their instincts. For the most part they gritted their teeth and did what they were told. But the old conflicts of interest between the main Soviet institutions in Moscow – the army, the KGB, the Party, and the government – and their representatives in Kabul continued to dog the course of the Soviet withdrawal, at times raising serious doubts over its timing and manner. Najibullah exploited the differences with skill.

In July 1986 Gorbachev withdrew six regiments from Afghanistan. That showed, he told the Politburo, that the USSR did not intend to stay in Afghanistan or to 'break through to the warm ocean'. The Soviet Union was matching deeds to words. Najibullah needed to understand that and to take matters into his own hands. This was a genuine reduction of fifteen thousand in the 40th Army's strength. It brought the Russians no credit in the outside world, where it was dismissed as a propaganda stunt.[19]

In November 1986 Gorbachev spelled out the issues to the Politburo yet again. 'We've been fighting for six years already! Some people are saying that if we go on like this, the war could last for twenty or thirty years ... People are beginning to ask, Are we going to sit there for ever? Or should we finish off this war? If we don't, we will cover ourselves with shame in every respect. The strategic objective is to finish off the war in one or at the most two years and withdraw our forces.' Shevardnadze added that the Soviets needed to decide who was in charge on their own side: was it the army or was it the KGB?

The military situation was clearly still unsatisfactory. The Russians had failed to close the Afghan frontier. The rebels had changed tactics and gone underground. Akhromeev, by now the Chief of the General

Staff, said what many of his soldiers had been telling him for some time: 'In the past seven years Soviet soldiers have had their boots on the ground in every square kilometre of the country. But as soon as they left, the enemy returned and restored everything the way it was before. We have lost this war. The majority of the Afghan people support the counter-revolution. We have lost the peasantry, who have got nothing from the revolution. Eighty per cent of the country is in the hands of the counter-revolution. And the position of the peasants there is better than it is in the territory controlled by the government.'

The Politburo agreed that the aim was no longer to build socialism in Afghanistan, but to withdraw half of the Soviet troops in one year and the remainder in two; to broaden the political and social base of the regime; and then leave them to get on with it. Gorbachev proposed direct negotiations with Pakistan.[20]

The Politburo's next discussion in January 1987 was a gloomy occasion. The difficulty of withdrawing with honour had become increasingly apparent. As Gorbachev said, 'We could leave quickly, without worrying about the consequences, and blame everything on our predecessors. But that we cannot do. We have not given an account of ourselves to the people. A million of our soldiers have passed through Afghanistan. [He was badly briefed: it was about six hundred thousand.] And it looks as if they did so in vain. So why did those people die?'

Shevardnadze had just visited Kabul. He reported that the traditional goodwill towards the Soviet Union had gone. Too many people had died. '[W]e went in without knowing anything at all about the psychology of the people, and that's a fact. And everything we have done and are doing in Afghanistan is incompatible with the moral basis of our country.' Najibullah made a good impression, but his support was crumbling. The military situation was getting worse. It was impossible to close the border with Pakistan. The war could not be won by military means. Summing up, Gorbachev pointed out that in Poland, despite ideological misgivings, the Soviet Union had accepted the position of the Church, private agriculture, political pluralism. One had to face reality. It was better to pay with treasure than with blood.

In January a Deputy Foreign Minister, Anatoli Kovalev, went to Pakistan to talk to President Zia ul-Haq. In February Gorbachev re-emphasised the importance of involving the Americans and suggested that he might invite Zia ul-Haq for talks to Tashkent. When Gromyko argued that there was no alternative to a military withdrawal, Gorbachev replied sharply, 'There is an alternative. We could bring in two hundred thousand more troops. But that would lead to the collapse of our whole cause.'[21]

The Politburo met again in May 1987, with senior officials from Kabul in attendance, including Varennikov. By now, they lamented, the Afghan army was falling apart; the Americans and the Pakistanis were doing all they could to undermine the Policy of National Reconciliation; and Najibullah was failing to get a grip. Akhromeev argued that making Najibullah the centrepiece of a new political line-up would simply lead to endless fighting. Gorbachev said that there was no one else. The Russians would be accused of treachery if they simply abandoned him: 'We won't be able to explain that to our own people. And in Afghanistan the supporters of the mujahedin will remember for a long time how we destroyed them, and the supporters of Najibullah will remember how we left them in the same boat as their enemies. We will be left with an unfriendly Afghanistan. But at the same time we can't go on with this war for ever.'

Summing up a somewhat despairing discussion, Gorbachev concluded that the UN and the Americans needed to be more fully involved. The UN could provide a neutral framework for negotiation. The Americans were by far the largest suppliers of arms to the mujahedin, and no guarantee of non-interference would hold without them.[22] Najibullah should be given more economic aid, but be firmly told that the Russians intended to finish with the Afghan question in eighteen months. Ways should be found of associating with the government, the mujahedin, the exiled king, Zahir Shah, and moderates such as Rabbani.[23]

### *The Diplomatic Manoeuvring*

The next ten months were taken up with diplomatic manoeuvring in Geneva, Islamabad, Moscow, New York, and Washington, against the background of the UN negotiations, which had sputtered on since

1982. The Americans had in fact been involved from the earliest days of the Reagan presidency. Jack Matlock, the US Chargé d'Affaires in Moscow in 1981, was instructed to tell the Russians that the Americans would 'discuss ways to ensure the security of the Soviet Union's southern border and also make a commitment not to use the territory of Afghanistan against the Soviet Union'. The message received no response. After the Geneva Summit, Reagan wrote to Gorbachev on 28 November 1985 saying, 'I want you to know that I am prepared to cooperate in any reasonable way to facilitate [a Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan] in a manner which does not damage Soviet security.'[24] This letter too received no response.

Now, in 1987, Moscow stepped up the tempo. In September Shevardnadze told US Secretary of State George Shultz (1920–) that 'we will leave Afghanistan. It may be in five months or a year.'[25] Shultz was struck with this news, but believed that it would fall foul of the right-wingers in Reagan's cabinet. He kept it to himself for weeks, for fear he would be accused of going soft on Moscow.[26]

Three months later Gorbachev told Reagan that he agreed that Afghanistan should be neutral, independent, and pluralistic. Afghanistan was not a socialist state. How it developed was a matter for the Afghans themselves. The Soviet Union needed a friendly Afghanistan, but was not seeking bases there. Both the Americans and the Russians should back the process of National Reconciliation. The Americans should cease their support for the mujahedin. Once there was an agreed date for the withdrawal of Soviet forces, they would no longer participate in military operations. But the two men did not settle on any matter of substance. Reagan even suggested – bizarrely – that the Kabul government should disband its army.[27] Gorbachev left Washington with the impression that the Americans were happy to leave the Russians to flounder and even to hamper the departure of their troops.

The Russians and the Americans later disagreed on what had passed at this meeting, each believing that the other had failed to take the opportunity to make a positive move. The Russians believed that Reagan had indicated that he was willing to cut off supplies to the mujahedin. Shevardnadze so informed Najibullah – and, rather incautiously, the Afghan press – in January 1988. Shultz issued a furious denial. The Soviet Foreign Ministry asked Jack Matlock, by then ambassador in Moscow, for a clarification. After consulting Washington, he replied that the Americans would refrain from supplying the mujahedin if the Soviets cut off military supplies to the Kabul government. This was not of course a deal that the Russians could easily accept, and in the event both sides continued to supply their protégés. The Russians retained an obscure feeling that they had been somehow double-crossed.

Matlock believed in later years that agreement on an orderly withdrawal, including a provision for the Americans to cease aid to the mujahedin without the Soviets having to cut off support for Kabul, could have been reached in 1986 or 1987 if Gorbachev had been willing to engage Reagan earlier. Whether the domestic politics of either side would have permitted that is a very open question.[28]

On 1 April 1988 the Politburo met to consider the outcome of the Geneva negotiations. The Americans were now ready to sign, provided that there was no mention of military aid to the mujahedin. Chernyaev thought that the issue was now moot: the mujahedin would get their aid whatever the final agreement said, and the Russians were preparing to withdraw their troops whether or not the agreement was signed. Gorbachev asked for views. Everyone agreed that the Soviet Union should sign. Gorbachev gave the news to Najibullah in Tashkent ten days later; he took it with apparent equanimity.[29]

The agreements were finally signed in Geneva on 14 April 1988 under the aegis of the United Nations. A bilateral agreement between the Kabul government and Pakistan provided for non-interference and non-intervention. The Russians and the Americans signed a declaration on international guarantees. And there were provisions for the Soviet troops to withdraw in two stages by 15 February 1989. The mujahedin were not a party and refused to accept the terms. This opened the way to the fall of the Najibullah regime and the subsequent murderous civil war: the nightmare that Gorbachev had feared when he confided to Chernyaev in September 1987 that the Soviet withdrawal might be followed by a bloodbath 'for which we would not be forgiven, either by the Third World, or by the shabby Western liberals who have spent the last ten years lambasting us for occupying the place'.[30]

Shevardnadze signed in Geneva with a heavy heart. 'One would have thought I would have been happy: no more coffins were coming home. We'll close the account: both of the deaths and of the drain on our resources, which had reached 60 billion roubles ... It was hard for me to realise that I was the Foreign Minister who had signed what was certainly not an agreement about a victory. There aren't many examples of that in Russian or Soviet history. And I couldn't stop thinking about the people we had trained up, pushed into a revolution, and were now abandoning to face a mortal foe alone.'[31] Such sentiments were to affect the policy advice he gave over the next two years.

'We will leave the country in a deplorable situation,' he told the Politburo on his return, 'ruined cities and villages, a paralysed economy. Hundreds of thousands of people have died. Our withdrawal will be regarded as a major political and military defeat. Within the Party and among the people the attitude to our departure is ambiguous. We must at least announce that the introduction of our troops was a gross error, that even then the experts and the public were against that adventure ... We may not be able to distance ourselves easily from the past by arguing that we do not bear responsibility for our predecessors.' He suggested that ten to fifteen thousand Soviet troops should be left behind to support the regime, a proposal clearly at odds with the agreement he had just signed. Kryuchkov supported him. Gorbachev reacted strongly to what he called 'Shevardnadze's hawkish scream'. It did not matter, he said, whether Najibullah survived or not. The legal basis for the Soviet withdrawal meant that it could not be compared with the way the Americans had bolted from Vietnam. Everything possible had been done to limit the negative consequences of the war.[32]

Disagreements about how far the Russians should assist Najibullah – if necessary by using military force – continued to bedevil Soviet policymaking until well after the withdrawal was completed. Shevardnadze and Kryuchkov continued their hawkish stance, opposed for the most part by the military.

### *The First Phase of the Withdrawal: Summer 1988*

The Defence Minister, General Yazov, had already issued plans for the withdrawal. The total Soviet force now numbered about a hundred thousand. Half would leave by 15 August 1988, the remainder by 15 February 1989. The routes would be the same as those for the original invasion, but in reverse: in the west from Kandahar via Shindand and Herat to Kushka; in the east over the Salang Pass to Khairaton and across the Friendship Bridge to Termez.

The first move was to bring outlying garrisons into their parent regiments. The garrisons on the eastern border with Pakistan – Jalalabad, Gardez, and Ghazni – were withdrawn completely. So were the southward-facing garrisons in Kandahar and Lashkar Gar. The Russians also pulled out of their positions in the north-east in Kunduz and Faisabad. By the end of the first phase, the Soviet forces were concentrated between Shindand and Kushka in the west, and between Kabul and the great supply base of Khairaton in the east.

The garrison from Jalalabad was the first to leave. A tribunal was hastily erected on the parade ground for the benefit of the senior Soviet officers and Afghan local politicians. A group of uncommunicative UN military observers was there to ensure that the Geneva Agreements were properly carried out. Behind the tribunal was a buffet loaded with ham, sausage, cheese – things the garrison never normally saw. At dawn the armoured vehicles were drawn up on the square, their crews beside them. Their faces were grim, unsmiling, exhausted, as they listened to the endless speeches. Their officers congratulated them on having fulfilled their 'international duty'. Crowds of Afghans gathered to wave them goodbye. They threw bouquets of flowers at the departing troops. Among the flowers were other small gifts: stones and pieces of camel dung.[33] Then the orchestra played the traditional march, 'The Slav Girl's Farewell', and the column started on the hundred mile journey to Kabul, through the passes where the British Army of the Indus had been wiped out in January 1842. The battle helicopters clattered overhead to protect it from attack, turning aside to investigate when little puffs of gun smoke from the mountainsides revealed the presence of snipers.

'All along the way,' wrote David Gai, a Soviet journalist who accompanied the column, 'was what remained of the roadside *kishlaks*. Not one was undamaged: the walls were overturned, the houses were

smashed, the trees were twisted. The fields were bare and uncultivated, the irrigation systems had been turned into marsh. And who had gained from the way everything had been reduced to useless collapse? How much effort would have to be put into restoring life to that dead space? The futility of those 3,200 (or however many it was) days of war made one's eyes burn with shame ... The only good thing was that the boys were going home.'[34]

Soviet long-range bombers continued to strike mujahedin positions around Kandahar and Jalalabad after the troops had left.[35]

The 860th Independent Motor-rifle Regiment also left Afghanistan as part of the first wave. By then Alexander Gergel had long returned home. He got the story of his battalion's last days in Bakharak from Anastas Lizauskas, whom he tracked down on the Internet in 2005.

The fighting went on to the last. The rumour spread among the soldiers that a foreign film maker, who had made one film about the Russians destroying peaceful villages, now wanted to make another about the destruction of a Soviet battalion. He encouraged the mujahedin to attack. The Russians and the mujahedin bombarded one another inconclusively for a week. As an Afghan general came to take over the fort the soldiers, furious at leaving with their tails between their legs after nine years of war, erupted in an orgy of destruction. They put shells down the lavatories, destroyed the sports facilities, set fire to the sleeping quarters, knocked down the memorials in the Alley of Glory, and destroyed the vehicles while the Afghan soldiers looked on in silent rage. As a final gesture, someone fired a signal rocket into the canteen. Then the soldiers, each with his personal weapon and as much loot as he could squeeze into a sack, hurried to the helicopters. The mujahedin were already closing in from the mountains. A week later the Afghan soldiers handed the fort over to the mujahedin. It was destroyed in subsequent months by a series of strikes by Soviet and Afghan government aircraft.[36]

### *The Second Phase of the Withdrawal: Winter 1988–9*

The second phase of the withdrawal was supposed to begin in November, before the heavy snows settled. This timetable was disrupted by the mujahedin, by Najibullah's government, and by conflicts within the Soviet administration both in Kabul and in Moscow.

The mujahedin were still receiving arms and other supplies from the Pakistanis and the Americans. According to Soviet figures, 172 large caravans arrived in September and October alone.[37] By now Najibullah was deeply worried that his interests and those of the Soviet Union were rapidly diverging. In early September he told Varennikov with remarkable frankness that he was doing everything he could to slow the departure of the Soviet forces so as to offset American and Pakistani violations of the Geneva Agreements. Varennikov told Najibullah firmly that both Soviet and international opinion would be incensed if the Soviet troops did not leave on time.[38] Najibullah returned to the charge in October, when he met the senior Soviet representatives in Kabul. Masud was the main problem, he said, and would have to be dealt with by military means if negotiation failed. He claimed for good measure that Masud was plotting with the CIA to let in the Americans.[39]

There was sympathy for Najibullah both in Moscow and among the senior Russians in Kabul: they had put him in place and they could not with honour abandon him. For them, too, the main problem was Masud; but they disagreed among themselves on what should be done. Once it was clear that the Soviets were indeed going to withdraw, Masud's men had been careful to avoid provocation, especially along the Salang Highway. But government forces were continuing to fire upon the neighbouring villages, and Masud warned that if this did not stop, he would take counter-measures. Varennikov helped negotiate a temporary ceasefire: by now it had become normal for Soviet commanders of all levels to make such arrangements with the elders of nearby *kishlaks* and the commanders of rebel groupings as a way of reducing losses.[40] But the practice was not appreciated or understood by the Afghan government leaders, who believed that the Russians were intriguing with the opposition because they did not want to fight.

Varennikov believed that the Russians had an interest in remaining on reasonable terms with Masud. Masud was highly effective militarily, he commanded unequalled authority among the people, he had ordered his men not to attack the Soviet forces, and he was being obeyed. Although he remained a determined opponent of the government, in

accordance with the Policy of National Reconciliation his forces fired only if they were fired on. Varennikov pointed out to Moscow that if the Russians did what Najibullah wanted, and resumed military action against Masud, the 40th Army would suffer heavy losses, the withdrawal timetable would be disrupted, the Soviet Union would be in breach of the Geneva Agreements, and domestic opinion would be outraged. Masud was of course the main threat to the Kabul regime, and would probably step up his military activity once the Soviets had left. But in the long run he could become a major political figure in post-war Afghanistan, someone with whom the Soviet Union could cooperate. It was better to have him as an ally than an enemy. The Soviets should get into direct contact with him through intelligence channels.[41]

At this point a new player arrived on the scene: Yuli Vorontsov, Yegorychev's replacement as ambassador in Kabul, and one of the Soviet Union's most experienced diplomats. Vorontsov had already had some direct dealings with the mujahedin. On 6 December he met Rabbani and other representatives of the Alliance of Seven in Saudi Arabia.[42] The meeting got off to an awkward start until Rabbani decided that he could after all shake hands with the representative of the enemy. Vorontsov said that the Soviets would leave as they had promised. Rabbani clearly thought he was lying and said, 'What do you mean, you're leaving? You have put so much into Afghanistan. So many of your people have died there. You're not going to leave. Stop talking rubbish!' Vorontsov replied that from now on Afghans like Rabbani were going to have to be responsible for their own country. Once the Soviets left, Afghanistan could expect no more assistance from them. He repeated the message when he met the mujahedin again in Islamabad. The Russians did not want to leave in a welter of blood, said Vorontsov, and appealed to them to respond in kind. They replied, 'If you really leave, then we won't shoot at you.' They more or less kept their promise.[43]

On 18 December Varennikov wrote to Masud direct. He suggested that representatives from both sides should meet within a week. He made concrete proposals for managing the highway from Kabul to Khairaton to ensure that food and other goods continued to flow. If Masud was willing to guard the highway, the necessary agreements should be signed with the local authorities along the road. If not, the



Soviet and Afghan forces would set up their own posts; and would take appropriate measures if Masud's men fired on them.

Lyakhovski drew up a list of political propositions to be discussed with Masud. These included the creation of an autonomous Tajik region in the north, with its own armed forces operating under the general authority of the Afghan military; a centrally backed plan for economic development; representation in the organs of central government; direct trade and economic and cultural links between the autonomous Tajik region and their cousins in Soviet Tajikistan. These ideas were approved by Varennikov, Vorontsov, and, rather surprisingly, the Afghan leadership.

They did not, however, survive the strong pressure for military action against Masud which had now developed in Moscow. Yazov, Kryuchkov, and Shevardnadze all favoured it, and accused Varennikov of conspiring behind the backs of his superiors and refusing to carry out their orders and the requests of the Afghan government.[44] Yazov rang Gromov direct to ask why Masud had not yet been dealt with. When Gromov objected that the operation would be bloody and pointless, Yazov said, 'Get on with it, and smash him.'

The military caved, and launched air strikes against Masud's men deployed around the lapis lazuli mines outside the Pandsher itself. Masud was told that the strikes were a deliberate warning. Inevitably he regarded them as a serious breach of faith by the Russians. His reply was swift and conclusive. He wrote on 26 December: 'I was already wanting to go to meet the Soviet representatives when I got your last letter. I will speak quite plainly. We have already had to bear this war and your invasion for ten years. God willing, we will manage to stick it out for a few more days. But if you take military action, we will resist appropriately. That is all I have to say! From today we will put our detachments and groups on full military alert.'

That was the last attempt by the Soviet military to negotiate with Masud. But there was to be one more military action against him. In the middle of January Shevardnadze visited Kabul. Najibullah asked that Soviet troops should remain – temporarily – to guard the Salang Highway; and that Soviet bombers should be on permanent alert at bases close to Afghanistan to strike the rebels if necessary. He

complained that no major operation had been mounted against Masud for four whole years. As long as Masud survived, it would be impossible to get supplies through to the capital. That was the key to whether the present regime lived or died. Shevardnadze pointed out the international implications: Najibullah's proposal would bring the Soviet Union into conflict with the USA and Pakistan. But he promised to look into the matter and told the senior Soviet representatives in Kabul that, to prevent a blockade of the capital, Soviet forces should remain, perhaps indefinitely, to guard Kabul airport and the road across the Salang. He instructed the embassy to work out a plan to leave twelve thousand soldiers behind, either under UN auspices or as 'volunteers'.

Varennikov and his colleagues were furious at what they saw as yet another betrayal of the military by Shevardnadze and the other politicians to serve Najibullah's political ambitions. Gritting their teeth, they put the withdrawal on hold while they planned for what they called, perhaps with deliberate irony, Operation *Typhoon*, the code name which the Germans had given to their offensive against Moscow in 1941. The operation was due to begin on 24 January. Najibullah appealed to the population along the road to move out for the time being. Heavy artillery and rocket launchers were put in place.

Meanwhile Shevardnadze forwarded to Moscow another proposal from Najibullah that the Soviets should send a brigade to lift the blockade of Kandahar and protect arms convoys to the city. When he heard of it, Chernyaev exploded. 'Has he gone off his head? Doesn't he see Najibullah is laying a trap to ensure we don't leave, and to embroil us with the Americans and the whole of the rest of the world? Or hasn't he got the guts to produce the counter-arguments?' Najibullah's regime was finished anyway: all the Soviets could now do was save his skin. Chernyaev listened in as Gorbachev phoned Shevardnadze. Shevardnadze started to blame the military. Chernyaev interrupted: 'All the military have done is to work out the technicalities of the political plan which you've agreed with Najibullah. But that plan is clean contrary to our whole policy, and to plain common sense, without mentioning the losses to which you will be exposing our boys.'

'You've not been there,' replied Shevardnadze angrily. 'You've no idea all the things we have done there in the past ten years!'

'But why should we compound our crimes! What's the logic in that? We're not going to be able to save Najibullah anyway ...'

'But he says that if he can hold out for a year after we leave, he will be able to survive indefinitely ...'

'And you believe that? And for that you're ready to sacrifice our boys and break the engagement we gave in Geneva?'[45]

The Politburo met on 24 January. Shevardnadze insisted that the Soviet Union could not be indifferent to the fate of Najibullah's regime. Ten to fifteen thousand Soviet troops should be left behind, not least because they would be guarding the roads along which the army would withdraw. Once again he was supported by Kryuchkov. But Gorbachev summed up against him. The Soviet Union had a moral obligation towards Najibullah: everything should be done to help him survive as long as he could. But there were only twenty days left and the withdrawal was to be completed on time.

## *Operation* Typhoon

The Politburo decision came too late to halt *Typhoon*. Yazov had already ordered Varennikov to begin the operation a day early, on 23 January. It lasted for two days.[46] The morale of the troops was by now at rock bottom. Why, the soldiers wondered, should they risk their lives yet again, on the eve of departure for a homeland where, they knew, the war was seen as unjust, no better than the American performance in Vietnam. One young officer asked his superior on the eve of the operation, 'Why does there have to be more bloodshed? ... I will try to encourage the men in my battalion. But I tell you frankly, that if I am ordered to shoot, I will carry out the order, but I will hate myself.'[47]

Fighter bombers and heavy bombers from bases inside the Soviet Union launched more than a thousand sorties against the rebel bases. More than four hundred strikes were carried out by rocket and conventional artillery. At times the bombardment resembled the massive storm of artillery which preceded the Red Army's great offensives in the Second World War.[48] After it was over, the staff of the 40th Army reported that six hundred rebels had been killed. The survivors were demoralised, and continued air and artillery strikes were preventing them from regrouping and bringing up reinforcements. A tented camp

All day the soldiers and officers checked their vehicles and cleaned up their best uniforms, while Gromov went to look at the transit base. It was so huge that he would have needed a week to explore it all. There were great stores of tractors, agricultural vehicles, roofing material, cement, sugar, flour. His Afghan guide showed him one container that had been sealed since it had arrived in 1979 until a few days earlier, when it had been opened. It was full of cakes and confectionery, which had all quietly rotted away.

On returning to his soldiers, Gromov paraded them to make sure they were fully prepared for the next day's event. He had his own vehicle – BTR No. 305 – inspected and checked and then inspected again. The last thing he wanted was for it to break down in the middle of the bridge.

He did not sleep well that last night. He felt emptied of emotion: the exhilaration of the previous days had evaporated. He dozed off at four o'clock, but woke up even before his alarm clock rang. By five o'clock the base was already coming alive. Soldiers were moving about and laughing, and the first vehicles were warming up their engines. Someone started to sing.

At nine o'clock Gromov called in his adjutant to check that his uniform was in order and at nine thirty he gave the order to move. The battalion's armoured personnel carriers passed before him on to the bridge. Some of the soldiers were weeping. At nine forty-five Gromov followed them in his command vehicle, carrying the banner of the 40th Army. It was the last vehicle across. The withdrawal was complete.[53]

The other side of the river was crowded with local Party and government officials, hundreds of Soviet and foreign journalists, and the relatives of soldiers who had not returned, hoping against hope to get news that they had perhaps been found safe and well at the last minute. Among the crowd was Alexander Rozenbaum, a young journalist from *Severny Komsomolets*, the Archangel youth newspaper. Fifty-nine boys from Archangel had been killed in Afghanistan and Rozenbaum's moving report of the ceremony at the bridge ended with the questions which everyone was now asking: Why did we go in? Who are the guilty men?[54]

People embraced the soldiers, kissed them, threw flowers under the tracks of their vehicles. Gromov's son Maksim was there, and ran to embrace him. Then there were speeches, a meal in a nearby café for the officers. Gromov phoned Yazov, who congratulated him unenthusiastically. And then, apart for the administrative chores, it was all over.

Even now the official press was still peddling the old myths. In those very last days *Pravda* wrote, 'An orchestra played as the Nation welcomed the return of her sons. Our boys were coming home after fulfilling their international obligations. For 10 years Soviet soldiers in Afghanistan repaired, rebuilt, and constructed hundreds of schools, technical colleges, over 30 hospitals and a similar number of nursery schools, some 400 blocks of flats and 35 mosques. They sank dozens of wells and dug nearly 150 km of irrigation ditches and canals. They were also engaged in guarding military and civilian installations in trouble.'[55]

But there was no one from Moscow to greet the soldiers at the bridge – no one from the Party, no one from the government, no one from the Ministry of Defence, no one from the Kremlin. Years later their excuse was that it had been a dirty war, that to have made the journey to Termez would have been in effect to endorse a crime.[56] It was an extraordinary omission – very bad politics, as well as very bad behaviour. The soldiers never forgot or forgave the insult.

- THIRTEEN -

# THE WAR CONTINUES

The men of the 40th Army who crossed the bridge were not the last Russian soldiers to leave Afghanistan, nor the last to see action there. Parachutists were stationed in the embassy grounds to guard the ambassador and his much diminished staff, who were now brought in from their outlying apartments in the *microrayons* and elsewhere. Soviet military specialists remained to assist the Afghan army to operate the more sophisticated equipment. And Soviet special forces and reconnaissance troops continued to operate in the outlying provinces, especially on the borders of the Soviet Union.[1]

And some people were moving in the opposite direction, back to Kabul on planes that were by now half empty. When he returned at the beginning of January, Andrei Greshnov had more than 250 kilograms of hand baggage. Luckily there were no Afghan customs officers on duty as he arrived, so he did not have to explain that the jam jars and rubber-topped bottles he was carrying were full of alcohol. He and the other Soviet correspondents, who for the most part were hanging around with nothing to do, remained in their villas, but installed backup teletype machines in case something went wrong in their offices in town.

The austerity had its compensations. The embassy shop was stuffed with goodies, a rich and unfamiliar choice of food products and consumer goods: everything left in the army shops had been moved to the embassy. The spirit ration was raised to four bottles of Moldovan cognac and four bottles of white wine. The limit on beer was lifted entirely.

Before they left, the departing soldiers had sold everything that could possibly be sold: ammunition, food, blankets, sheets, consumer goods, corned beef, Greek juices, Dutch fizzy drinks, Polish and Hungarian ham, green peas, sunflower oil, tinned meats, tea, and cigarettes. So surfeited was the market that Soviet goodies remained on sale in Afghan shops for years afterwards.

One particularly imaginative racket was dreamed up by a group of warrant officers. The air force was abandoning boxes of plastic nose cones – *nursiki* – for their rockets. You could drink from them, but apart from that they were not much good for anything. The racketeers started by going round the shops and asking the traders if they had any *nursiki* for sale. The traders had never heard of *nursiki* and asked what they were for. 'You wouldn't understand,' said the racketeers. 'They are very useful, very scarce, and very expensive.' After they had launched a few boxes of nose cones on to the market, the racketeers bought them back at inflated prices. The cupidity of the traders pushed the price sky high, and when demand seemed to be at its height, the racketeers sold off two lorry-loads and pulled out. When the traders complained to the Soviet Embassy, they were told, 'If you can't stand the heat, don't go into the kitchen.' Years later the traders were still wondering how they could have let themselves be so comprehensively fooled.

One thing in particular caught Greshnov's eye in the Kabul of those last days. There was a T-62 tank on a pedestal as a monument outside the Central Committee of the National People's Army in Kabul. It had been there for ten years at least: Greshnov had seen it at the time of the coup against Amin. He wondered whether it was still in working order. Three years later the tank was removed from its pedestal by the forces of Ahmad Shah Masud as they retreated from the capital. They filled it up with diesel, put in a new battery, and drove it off to the Pandsher Valley.[2]

*The Civil War Continues*

The 40th Army had gone, but the Afghan civil war continued with horrifying force. The morale of the mujahedin was high. Arms continued to reach them from Pakistan in contravention of the Geneva Agreements. These the Pakistanis had never had any intention of observing: President Zia ul-Haq told President Reagan that they had been denying their activities in Afghanistan for eight years, and that Muslims had the right to lie in a good cause.[3] Most people predicted that the Najibullah government would soon be replaced by an Islamic, possibly fundamentalist, government which 'at best', the CIA observed gloomily, 'will be ambivalent, and at worst ... may be actively hostile, especially toward the United States.'[4]

For their part the Russians continued to supply Kabul with massive quantities of food, fuel, ammunition, and military equipment. A Soviet military delegation led by Varennikov visited Afghanistan at the beginning of May 1989 to discuss ways and means.[5] By 1990 Soviet aid to the Kabul government had reached a value of $3 billion a year. The Afghan army and air force were entirely dependent on these supplies, and fought well against the mujahedin as long as the supplies continued.

A major battle erupted around the city of Jalalabad almost immediately after the 40th Army had left. The fall of this city would, the Pakistanis believed, be followed by the fall of Kabul and enable their protégé Hekmatyar to seize power.[6] The mujahedin began their offensive at the beginning of March 1989, capturing an outlying post by bribing the officer in charge.[7] They then attempted to take the airport, but were repulsed with heavy losses, compounded by the failure of individual mujahedin commanders to agree on a common plan. Early in the battle the mujahedin executed a number of prisoners, which reinforced the determination of the government soldiers to resist.

Once again Najibullah asked for Soviet air support. Gorbachev called an emergency meeting on 10 March to consider the request. It was rejected.[8] But further attacks were broken up by the government's own aircraft and by April the government troops were on the offensive. They bombarded the mujahedin with over four hundred Scud missiles developed from the Germans' wartime V2 rockets and fired by the Soviet crews who had remained behind. Like the V2, you got no warning of the Scud's arrival until it had exploded. 'The mujahedin, who, one would have thought, were already inured to the use in their homeland of every kind of weapon,' wrote Greshnov, who visited Jalalabad at the time, '...were psychologically unable to cope when these rockets were employed against them ... Losses among the civilian population could be counted in thousands, and the battle itself acquired such a massive and brutal character that it could be compared in military terms perhaps only with the battle for Stalingrad.'[9] The soldiers cleared the road from Kabul – the old 'English' road, along which the Army of the Indus had retreated in 1842 – and relieved the city. By the time the battle was over, in July 1989, the mujahedin had lost more than three thousand killed and wounded. One mujahedin field commander lamented that 'the battle of Jalalabad lost us the credit won in ten years of fighting'. In the eyes of Brigadier Mohamed Yousaf, the ISI officer responsible for supplying the mujahedin with arms for much of the war, 'The Jehad has never recovered from Jalalabad.' He was writing just after the war was over and predicted that the ragged end to the war would 'not bring peace or stability to Afghanistan or the border areas of Pakistan'.[10] His words turned out to be prophetic.

Kandahar had always been a dangerous city for foreigners, full of sullen Pushtun bazaars, where people assumed that if you spoke their language it was because you were a spy. Greshnov visited it with a party of foreign journalists in the summer of 1989, a year after the Soviet garrison had left in the first phase of the withdrawal.

The city looked very different from his previous visit in 1983. 'We drove through the green belt and past the first roadside shops. Everywhere the same hostile, cautious looks. A city of enemies, soaked in hatred for the Soviets. What has changed here? Well, almost nothing, if you ignore the fact that Kandahar has been largely destroyed. I had not seen the consequences of the Soviet air raid which took place on 8 December 1986. Now I saw for the first time how Kandahar looked without the Soviet forces.

'We stopped opposite the place where there used to be a coffee shop under a sign saying "Toyota". It was a part of the town I knew

well. But the coffee shop was no longer there ... Everything was recognisable, but everything was now different. Children clung to the BTRs. "*Ingrizi? Feransavi? Amrikai?*" ... I calmly said that I was a *shuravi*, a Soviet. They didn't believe me until I let out a stream of good Russian swearwords. They were overwhelmed by a childish delight which had not been driven out of them by the experience of war: perhaps they're the only people in Kandahar who did not remember us with hatred. Shoving their dirty fingers into their mouths to show they were hungry, they cried in Russian, "Soviet, Soviet, fuck your mother, good, give us baksheesh, give us a cigarette!"[11]

Kandahar was still under government control, but it was being regularly bombarded by the forces of Hekmatyar. It had endured two massive attacks in the past few months. Eighty per cent of the shopkeepers in the bazaar, the city governor told Greshnov, were mujahedin taking a rest from fighting. They used to come in for two to three days a month. Now they were coming in for fifteen to twenty days at a time. The number of mujahedin in the region had grown four- or fivefold since the departure of the Soviet forces. They were honest fellows, said the governor. They had no interest in destroying the city; they merely wanted to liberate it. The governor himself was in discreet touch with their leaders.

What were things coming to, wondered Greshnov, when the official governor of a major city started talking about 'honest mujahedin'?[12]

*The Fall of Kabul*

In 1989 and 1990 Najibullah's government had some success in strengthening the armed forces at its disposal. The KhAD had financed the creation of militia forces drawn from the former mujahedin: 100,000 former insurgents are said to have joined the government militias. The 17th Division in Herat – whose mutiny in March 1979 had helped launch the resistance to the Communists – now consisted of 3,400 regular troops and 14,000 militiamen. According to one calculation, the total numbers of security forces available to the government from all sources in 1988 was almost 300,000.[13]

The respite was shortlived. The rebels had not yet learned how to conduct conventional warfare and throughout 1989 the government forces were mostly successful at beating off their attacks.[14] But by the end of the summer of 1990, Afghan government forces were everywhere on the defensive. Masud by now commanded a force of twenty thousand men with tanks and artillery. By the first half of 1991, the government controlled only 10 per cent of Afghanistan, the city of Khost had finally fallen to the rebels, the morale of the army had collapsed, and desertion was rife. Shevardnadze and Kryuchkov had continued to oppose moves to cut off supplies to Najibullah. But Shevardnadze had resigned from the Soviet government in December 1990 and Kryuchkov was arrested after the abortive coup in August 1991. Najibullah no longer had a senior advocate in the Soviet government. The Soviet Union itself was on the verge of economic and political collapse. An Afghan official visiting Moscow at the time remarked, 'We saw all these empty stores in Moscow and long queues for a loaf of bread and we thought: what can the Russians give us?'[15]

Yeltsin, the coming power in Russian politics, had no interest in spending Russian money to ameliorate the consequences of a Soviet disaster. His officials began to talk openly of getting rid of Najibullah in favour of an Islamic government. That autumn Najibullah wrote bitterly to Shevardnadze, 'I didn't want to be president, you talked me into it, insisted on it, and promised support. Now you are throwing me and the Republic of Afghanistan to its fate.'[16] In December 1991 the representatives of the KGB finally abandoned Kabul and their long ambition to control Afghan affairs.[17] Even before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Yeltsin and his people had begun to deal directly with mujahedin leaders as part of their overall aim of wresting control of foreign policy from Gorbachev's government.[18] In January 1992 Yeltsin's new Russian government cut off military supplies and fuel to Najibullah.

The rot spread very fast. Najibullah's air force, his most effective weapon against the mujahedin, was grounded for lack of fuel. The rebels continued to receive supplies from Pakistan. They began to capture major cities and terrorist acts started to multiply in Kabul itself. In January 1992, on the fifth anniversary of the launching of his Policy of National Reconciliation, Najibullah publicly blamed the Soviet Union for the disasters that had overtaken Afghanistan and called the day of

the Soviet withdrawal 'the Day of National Salvation'. But his government was now beyond any salvation.

The Russians hung on in Kabul for as long as they could. By now the embassy had been turned into a fortress. It was surrounded by a double concrete wall with steel gates. Before they left in February 1989, Soviet military engineers had spent the whole year building an immense air-raid shelter just by the administrative block. The shelter had its own supply of water and electricity, an air-filter system, a substantial stock of food, and everything else that was necessary for the whole staff of the embassy to hold out there for some time. A large refrigerator was designated as a morgue. A separate secure apartment was set aside for Najibullah in case he should seek political asylum.[19] There was an atmosphere of hectic but suppressed tension inside the embassy in these last days. Fighting continued to grow in the western part of the city and one day the staff were ordered to the shelter, where they spent much time as the embassy and the area around it were increasingly subjected to deliberate rocket and artillery bombardment.[20]

Galina Ivanov and the other embassy wives lived in the shelter while their men went to their offices to work. There were two or three dozen men there as well. Several of them behaved badly: they let themselves go, did not bother to shave, quarrelled over the ration of food and water, and complained when Galina put a little food aside for the embassy dog. It got so unpleasant that she and the other women took to sleeping in the polyclinic until her husband, Valeri, acting on a hunch, rang to say that an attack was expected any minute: they were to get out of the polyclinic and seek proper shelter in the cellar of the embassy shop. The polyclinic was blown to pieces just as they were leaving and they barely escaped.[21]

The ambassador did what he could to build a workable relationship with such Afghan government as there still was. Soviet trading organisations continued to operate in Kabul under the overall direction of Valeri Ivanov. Yuri Muratkhanian was the director of Afsotr, the joint Soviet-Afghan transport company. On 12 August 1992 he was drinking tea with his wife, Nina, in their flat with Yevgeni Konovalov, the bookkeeper at the Russian trade office, when the building was hit by a shell from a tank. Nina and Konovalov were both mortally wounded, and died a few days later. Their bodies were sealed in zinc coffins and stored in the refrigerator which had been set aside as a morgue. The electricity kept failing and the freon in the refrigerator began to run out. Some Afghan friends braved the bombardment to bring in more.[22]

That same evening Najibullah called in the senior Russian military adviser, General Lagoshin, and told him that he and his colleagues – there were by now only seven military advisers left in Kabul – must leave Afghanistan urgently. The rebels would soon take power and he himself could survive in the post of president for only five more days. Najibullah added that, although the Soviets had betrayed him, he felt it was his duty to send the military advisers home safe and sound. And indeed, when the airport authorities put up various obstacles to their departure the next day, Najibullah came personally to the airport to help get them off to Tashkent.[23]

The following day Najibullah appealed to the UN to fly him into exile as his government finally fell to pieces. His party was stopped at the airport, which was now controlled by General Dostum, and he sought asylum in what he hoped would be the safe haven of the UN headquarters in Kabul.[24]

By now it made no sense to keep people in Kabul and the Russians decided to evacuate the embassy. The operation began at four o'clock on the morning of 28 August, when three aircraft left Termez for Kabul. The new ambassador, Yevgeni Ostrovenko, who had only been in Kabul for a few months, drove to the airport with his staff, picking up diplomats from Mongolia, China, Indonesia, and India on the way.

Both what was left of the Afghan government and the mujahedin had guaranteed that the Russian aircraft would land and leave Kabul safely. The three Il-76s flew in, firing flares to decoy rockets. Valeri Ivanov and his wife, Galina, the coffins containing the bodies of Nina Muratkhanian and Yevgeni Konovalov, and a number of other people and goods were loaded on to the first plane. It took off safely, climbing steeply to thirteen thousand feet to avoid the rockets before setting course for home. But then the mujahedin started to bombard the airport. The second aircraft also took off successfully, though several tyres on the undercarriage had been shredded by splinters. But the

third aircraft was set on fire, and the ambassador's wife, who had already gone on board, barely escaped. The paratroopers and aircrew were able to save some documents but no baggage as they jumped out of the aircraft just before it blew up.

The commander of the first aircraft refused to return to pick up those left behind, explaining to Ivanov that he had run out of flares. 'You would have to pay a very great deal to get me to change my mind,' he said, presumably as a joke. In Termez – in what was by now independent Uzbekistan – the airport staff refused to refuel the aircraft or supply food and water for the crew and the passengers unless they were given the two KaMAZ lorries the aircraft was carrying as a bribe. That was a measure, Ivanov thought, of how far things had deteriorated since the break-up of the Soviet Union.

The remainder of the embassy staff, including Ambassador Ostrovenko and his wife, had to be ferried out to Mazar-i Sharif in several An-12s provided by General Dostum. From there they were flown home.

One of the soldiers had rescued the bullet-riddled flag from the flagpole on the Russian Embassy. Years later it still hung in his office.[25]

Those who looked for parallels remembered that, two decades earlier, the American Embassy staff had been rescued from Saigon in circumstances even more humiliating.

There was now no coherent authority in the capital. The Uzbek militia commander General Dostum, who had hitherto been one of Najibullah's most effective commanders, had joined Masud and Hekmatyar in a drive on the capital. But their unity was ephemeral. The endemic hostility between the various mujahedin factions now broke out in an even more vicious form. Kabul had suffered little during the nine years of the Soviet war. Now much of it was destroyed by indiscriminate bombardment, and its people were subjected to looting, rape, and murder. Masud's troops were involved in some of the worst atrocities against the Hazara minority. By 1996 some forty thousand of the inhabitants are said to have been killed and two hundred thousand had fled.[26]

The civil war was brought to an end by the Taliban. Many of them had grown up in the refugee camps in Pakistan and had been educated in the orthodox Muslim schools there. They enjoyed their first success in the spring of 1994, when they captured the town of Spin Boldak on the Pakistani frontier. From then on they moved inexorably forward, capturing Kandahar but checked for a while at Kabul, where Masud seemed to be prevailing. Backed by Pakistan, they then turned their attention to the west of the country, taking over the base at Shindand with its aircraft, and capturing Herat without a fight in September 1995. The fighting around Mazar-i Sharif was marked by massacres on both sides, but the Taliban finally established themselves there in August 1996. Jalalabad and Kabul fell in September.[27]

For most of the inhabitants of Kabul the victory of the Taliban was, at least at first, a return to a kind of security and some sense of order, even if it was enforced by a brutal version of sharia law. But for Najibullah it was the end. The Taliban forcibly seized him and his brother in the UN headquarters, tortured them, castrated them, and hanged their bodies in the centre of the city.

*Masud's Assassination*

At first Masud's political and military career continued to flourish after the Russians had left. But the changing fortunes and shifting alliances of the civil war, and above all the rise of the Taliban, saw him increasingly on the defensive, under air attack, pushed back from Kabul. He fought with all his old skill, supported by Iran, Uzbekistan, and Russia. But he was eventually driven back into his old base in the Pandsher Valley. There he became leader of the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan, the Northern Alliance, which grouped together the leaders of the small proportion – one-tenth – of the country which was still free of the Taliban.

Despite these setbacks, the Russians continued to build up their links with Masud and the Northern Alliance. He corresponded with President Yeltsin and Yevgeni Primakov (1929–), who at that time was heading the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service.[28] In February 1994 Russian representatives came for secret talks with him in Afghanistan. In 1998 Masud sent his Foreign Minister, Abdullah Abdullah, to Moscow for talks about military-technical cooperation and the provision of military assistance. His representatives met with the Russian Chief of

Staff, General Kvashnin, Yeltsin's assistant Sevostyanov, and Deputy Foreign Minister Pastukhov. In 2000 serious fighting flared up again. The Taliban used tanks and aircraft against Masud, who despite being increasingly short of equipment and supplies was able to beat them off. In the spring of that year the Taliban declared a jihad against Russia. In October Masud met the Russian Minister of Defence, Marshal Sergeev, in Dushanbe and the Russians agreed to supply him with weapons and ammunition. The Taliban promptly issued a warning: 'Russia should cease interfering in the internal affairs of Afghanistan, otherwise it may create for itself many dangerous problems and grave consequences.' In December 2000, on the proposal of Russia and the United States, the United Nations Security Council agreed on further sanctions against the Taliban. In April 2001 Masud visited the European Parliament in Brussels and asked for help in the fight against the Taliban, whose associates Al Qaeda, he warned, would next turn their attention to the US and Europe.[29]

At the beginning of September 2001 Arkadi Dubnov, a journalist from *Novoe Vremya*, was staying in a guest house in the Pandsher Valley, waiting for an interview with Masud, whom he had got to know well since he first started working in Afghanistan in 1993. He shared a room with two Arab journalists who also wanted to interview Masud. The Arabs got their interview on 9 September and killed Masud with a bomb concealed in their TV camera. They were said to be Moroccans from a news agency in London. Scotland Yard therefore investigated the affair and Dubnov was interviewed by them. But the investigation was apparently abandoned for lack of sufficient evidence.[30]

President Putin (1952–) immediately telephoned President Bush (1946–). 'I said that Masud, the leader of the Northern Alliance, had just been killed. I told my American colleague: "I'm very worried. Something big is going to happen. They're planning something."'[31] The Twin Towers in New York were bombed two days later. Putin was the first foreign leader to express his condolences to Bush, and immediately took practical steps to support the forthcoming American campaign to destroy the Taliban and Al Qaeda. His people handed over a good deal of intelligence, including minefield maps – many of them inevitably inaccurate after the passage of time. He opened Russian air space to American military flights and persuaded the leaders of the Central Asian states to do the same. He met the leaders of the Northern Alliance, stepped up Russian military support for them, and convinced them to cooperate with the Americans. This collaboration did not flag. The northern supply route through Russia became increasingly important, as the Americans got into trouble with their supply route from Pakistan. The flow of intelligence continued. In October 2010 Russians provided support and advice for a US-led raid on four major narcotics factories, the first joint operation of its kind. Many Russians felt that the Americans were insufficiently grateful for what Putin had done to help them.[32]

Once the Americans' initial campaign was over and a new regime was installed in Kabul, the Russians continued to strengthen their links with the new Afghan regime, travelling to Afghanistan on open and confidential business as officials, journalists, and even tourists, as they had done almost uninterrupted since the end of the Soviet war.

Masud was buried in the Pandsher Valley, on a hill by his native village, Jangalak, and a monument was erected to him immediately. A substantial Russian delegation led by General Varennikov took part in the ceremonies at his grave on the second anniversary of his death. Over the years, as the cult of Masud grew more elaborate, the grave was converted into a massive mausoleum. The Russians continued to pay their annual respects. The Pushtuns looked on with resentment at this glorification of a man who was not one of them and who, they grumbled for years afterwards, had signed ceasefires with the Russians instead of continuing the struggle against them.[33]

### *The 201st Division Fights On*

For one of the divisions of the 40th Army the war never stopped. The 201st Division withdraw from Afghanistan to Tajikistan, and remained there after the country became independent on the collapse of the Soviet Union. Its headquarters were in the capital, Dushanbe, and its two regiments were deployed towards the Afghan frontier in Kulabe and Kurgan-Tobe. When civil war broke out in 1992 between the central government and Islamic rebels, the local Tajik conscripts deserted. The Russian officers and warrant officers withdrew to their

barracks with their families and refused to surrender to the mob. Yeltsin took the division back under Russian jurisdiction. Its numbers were made up with Russian conscripts and contract soldiers on generous terms, and it formed the core of the peacekeeping force set up by the Commonwealth of Independent States, a grouping of former Soviet republics. The force was disbanded when the civil war ended in 1997, but the division remained in Tajikistan, its status undefined.

The war did not stop for the KGB's frontier forces either. They too had their headquarters in Dushanbe, with detachments on the Afghan frontier. Some had been involved in operations inside Afghanistan, and some were among the 576 members of the KGB who had died there. Now they continued to guard the frontier between Afghanistan and Tajikistan against drug smugglers and the incursions of bands of fundamentalists anxious to support the Islamic rebels inside the country. They too were eventually brought under Russian jurisdiction. In May 1993 Russia and Tajikistan signed an agreement on friendship and cooperation which handed formal responsibility for the defence of the frontier to Russia.

Attacks against the frontier posts had already started. On 13 July a massive attack was launched in the early hours against the 12th *zastava* by about four hundred men, a mixture of mujahedin and soldiers from the 55th Infantry Division of the regular Afghan army. The garrison of the *zastava* consisted of forty-eight frontier force soldiers. Aroused by their watchdog, the garrison made for their battle positions as fire was brought down upon them from the surrounding hills and from the Afghan side of the frontier. The crew of the *zastavas*' one BTR were the first to die, even before they could mount their machine. After the twenty-five-year-old commander was killed, his deputy decided that the survivors would have to make a break for safety. A small force from the 201st Division and the Tajik army, backed by a couple of helicopters, was put together to rescue the beleaguered garrison. It ran into mines and ambushes on the only approach road, and the Tajik troops turned back. When the Russian relief force finally got through, they found that twenty-five of the garrison had been killed and their bodies mutilated.

Six members of the garrison were made 'Heroes of Russia' – four of them posthumously – to join the eighty-six men who had become 'Heroes of the Soviet Union' during the Afghan war.[34]

– FOURTEEN –

# A LAND FIT FOR HEROES

The soldiers who crossed the Friendship Bridge on 15 February returned to a country which had less than two years to live, a country which in its own way was as shattered as the one they had left behind them. A radical electoral process was under way which would see senior officers losing the parliamentary seats which they believed were theirs by right. The whisperings of discontent in the non-Russian republics of the union were becoming louder. The economy was in rapid decline. The press had always treated the military with respect: it now had free rein to criticise them unmercifully. There was much to resent, but the soldiers particularly resented a poem by the popular poet Yevgeni Yevtushenko, describing the thoughts of an Afghan ant as it crawled on the face of a dead Russian soldier.

The blows that then struck the Soviet army came close to destroying it as an effective military force.

The 40th Army had withdrawn from Afghanistan, in the eyes of its commanders, with its military reputation and its honour intact. It had achieved the limited tasks laid upon it by the politicians: to hold the towns, to keep open the communications, to keep the rebels at bay sufficiently for the government in Kabul to build up its military position and survive, at least for a time. The soldiers had done their

duty, and they had not been defeated on the battlefield. The war had been a bitter experience. But from the military point of view at least, it had not been a humiliation. Now, within months, the 40th Army, one of the most powerful in Soviet history, was disbanded, its generals, its divisional commanders, and their deputies transferred or sent off to military academies, its regimental commanders dispersed to units throughout the Soviet Union.

When the Soviet Union fell apart less than two years later, many of these officers found themselves serving in the armed forces of what were now independent countries. They had sworn an oath to the Soviet Union; some of them refused to swear another and gave up their military careers.

*The Bitterness of the Officers*

In their bitterness and confusion, many of the officers turned to the older traditions of their country. They began to feel a guilty sense of shame towards Russia, towards the land of their fathers, its villages depopulated, its churches in ruins, the village blacksmith silent, a country which had changed almost out of recognition, abandoned and forgotten, as one of them remarked, 'by me and people like me'.[1] They had sympathised with their great-grandfathers, the officers of the old Tsarist army who had been forced to choose sides in the civil war. Now, as civil war seemed to loom once again, they found themselves having to face a similar choice. Should they go with the new regimes of Gorbachev and Yeltsin? Or should they do what they could to preserve what was best in the Soviet regime?

They found themselves drawn willy-nilly into the increasingly confused and violent politics within the Soviet Union itself. The 345th Guards Independent Parachute Assault Regiment had been one of the first to enter Afghanistan and one of the last to leave. Now it was sent to Kirovabad in Azerbaijan, where there were no barracks, no motor park, no accommodation, and no money. In early April 1989, a mere two months after leaving Afghanistan, the regiment was sent urgently to Tblisi to take part in the brutal suppression of an anti-government demonstration. Nineteen civilian demonstrators were killed by soldiers using a noxious riot-control gas and wielding sharpened entrenching tools. Most of the dead were women and girls. The ultimate responsibility for the action was obscure, but most of the soldiers laid the blame on Gorbachev himself. Moscow, however, blamed the local Georgian politicians and the local military commanders. General Rodionov, the commander of the Caucasus Military District, who had been a distinguished commander of the 40th Army, was sacked and sent off to become principal of the General Staff College.[2] Nine months later, in January 1990, two hundred demonstrators were killed by the army in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan. Among those involved were a number of senior officers who had served in Afghanistan.

In September 1990 the Soviet government agreed on the reunification of Germany. In the eyes of many officers this was a betrayal of the victory against Hitler and a sell-out by Gorbachev, Shevardnadze, and the other 'liberals' who were now running the Soviet government. By then the withdrawal from Eastern Europe had already begun. In autumn 1989 a British general visited a tank division in the Ukraine which was due to be disbanded. The major general commanding the division said to him in front of his brother officers: 'Some people are beginning to say that the whole army is being thrown on the scrap heap ... [pause] I agree with them.'[3] Over the next couple of years nearly 500,000 soldiers and their families were withdrawn from the German Democratic Republic and the countries of Eastern Europe. The soldiers returned to poverty-stricken chaos. Many officers had nowhere to live, and had to survive with their families in tents and packing cases. The muttering among the soldiers was becoming increasingly audible. Senior officers were beginning to advise their sons not to follow them in the profession.

The Party had always been determined to keep the army non-political by sacking (or, under Stalin, by shooting) any general they suspected of 'Bonapartism'; and by allowing them a priority share of the country's economic resources for the design and mass production of weapons to match those of the other superpower, the United States of America. Now things began to take an increasingly sinister turn as the army started to slip from the control of the politicians. By the autumn of 1990 Gorbachev was being noisily attacked in public and in private by the two 'black colonels', Alksnis and Petrushenko, who regularly

accused him of outright treachery and got away with it. Party members wrote in to denounce him for betraying Eastern Europe and destroying the Soviet armed forces. In December 1990 fifty-three prominent personalities, including General Varennikov, who after Afghanistan had been appointed Commander of the Ground Forces, General Moiseev, the Chief of Staff, and Admiral Chernavin, the Commander-in-Chief of the Navy, called publicly for a state of emergency and presidential rule in conflict zones if constitutional methods proved ineffective. At the turn of the year twenty senior officers, including Akhromeev, by now a marshal, privately presented Gorbachev with an ultimatum setting out their grievances and demands.[4]

All this was unprecedented: the military had never before intervened so openly in politics. But in January 1991 things moved from words to action. Thirteen people demonstrating in favour of national independence were killed by special forces troops in Vilnius, the capital of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic. The circumstances remained obscure. It was not clear how much, if anything, Gorbachev knew or approved of the action in advance. But among those who were involved in its planning and execution was General Varennikov.

### *The Coup against Gorbachev*

The methods Gorbachev used to get out of Afghanistan and to pursue a more general reform may well have been the only ones likely to be effective. It was largely thanks to Gorbachev that the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rebirth of Russia were accomplished with comparatively little bloodshed. But the generals never forgave him for what they saw as the treachery which had led to the destruction of a great power. They firmly regarded him and his associates as traitors pure and simple. In his memoirs, Varennikov accuses Gorbachev of cowardice, demagogy, indecisiveness, ignorance of military and economic reality, and hostility towards the armed forces and the defence industry. He and his fellow senior officers came to believe that Gorbachev was an outright traitor.[5] These extreme views may have borne little relation to the facts. But what many officers saw as Gorbachev's lack of understanding or sympathy for the fighting men and his failure to treat them with the respect they believed they had earned in Afghanistan reflected a political reality which was to dog Gorbachev for the remainder of his time in office.

By now Varennikov and other senior officers had had enough, and became actively involved in the attempted coup against Gorbachev in August 1991.[6] On 17 August, the day before the coup itself, Varennikov attended a meeting called by Kryuchkov, the head of the KGB, to discuss what needed to be done to save the Soviet Union from political and economic collapse. Varennikov and others then flew down to the Crimea to see Gorbachev, who was on holiday there. When Varennikov told Gorbachev that, if he was not capable of running the country, he should draw the appropriate conclusion, the meeting broke up. Varennikov always regretted that no one had the necessary guts to remove Gorbachev on the spot. He himself went on to Kiev, where he tried to persuade the Ukrainian leaders to impose a state of emergency and to issue a warning that military force would be used to put down any attempt by local nationalists to exploit the situation. He failed, and much bloodshed was no doubt averted thereby.

The next day the plotters declared a national state of emergency and moved troops into Moscow. General Lyakhovski helped draw up plans for an assault on the White House, the seat of the Russian government and its defiant president, Boris Yeltsin.[7] But the coup split both the army and the KGB: many officers of both organisations were appalled by the way their former colleagues had taken arms against a legitimate government. Among the defenders of the White House were Colonel Rutskoi, the Afghan veteran decorated after being shot down over Pakistan, and veterans from the special forces in their characteristic blue and white striped T-shirts. The defenders had no more than a handful of weapons, and the assault, if it had come, would have been over very quickly. But the order was never issued and the coup collapsed. It was the Afgantsy who efficiently marshalled the funeral procession for the three young men – one of them himself a decorated Afghan veteran – who were killed in a muddled shoot-out on the second night of the coup.

The generals too were riven by internal disagreements, and during the coup some of them found themselves on opposite sides of the barricades. The most tragic was Marshal Akhromeev. A man of high intelligence and integrity, with an ironic sense of humour, he was caught

between two fires. No longer entirely trusted by his colleagues because he had done his best to serve Gorbachev as military adviser, sufficiently appalled by what was happening to his beloved military to sign the secret protest to Gorbachev at the end of 1990, he hanged himself on the collapse of the coup. Varennikov himself was arrested for his part in the coup and charged with treason. Yeltsin amnestied the plotters in February 1994. Varennikov refused to accept the amnesty, claiming that he had committed no treason: he had been defending the Soviet Union, which was the legitimate state at that time. He insisted on a trial and was acquitted.

The generals did not forgive Gorbachev's successor, Boris Yeltsin, any more than they forgave Gorbachev. They gritted their teeth and stormed the White House on his orders during the parliamentary rebellion of October 1993. The official figures for casualties were 187 dead and 437 wounded. Unofficial sources put the dead as high as two thousand. It was the deadliest street fighting in Moscow since 1917. The orgy of political and official corruption and profiteering which accompanied Yeltsin's economic reforms turned many of the generals against the whole idea of liberal democracy. It was not very surprising that many welcomed the more assertive and less democratic Russia championed by Vladimir Putin when he became President in 2000.

Now, disgusted by these events, many officers left the army altogether. They included some of the most famous soldier-bards: Viktor Kutsenko, Sergei Klimov, Vadim Dulepov, Vladimir Koshelev. One worked as a taxi driver, and when the 1991 putsch happened he drove from his Volga city to fight for Yeltsin on the barricades. Then he tried to go into commerce. But he did not like the corruption involved and went to work for the Moscow Metro instead. Another became a star of the music hall. One wrote philosophy. Another spent two years in prison for killing someone in a nightclub brawl.[8] Igor Morozov resigned his commission in 1993, at the age of forty-one. He went to live in the Ryazan oblast, on the land where his father and ancestors had come from. By fair means or foul the local authority was trying to take over the land, systematically driving out people whose families had lived there for generations. All Morozov's time and energy now went on fighting to keep his land and his house.[9]

## *The Fate of the Soldiers*

In the aftermath of the war in Afghanistan, the generals were sustained by their sense of military honour, and by the habits of thought of a professional life spent in the sequestered world of the military. But the conscripts who had borne the brunt of the fighting had no military tradition to fall back on. They had neither the time nor the energy to get mixed up in high politics. They were too busy trying to adapt to civilian life and to eke out a living in a country whose political and economic system had fallen apart, and whose citizens were themselves too traumatised by the collapse, and too bound up in their own struggle for everyday existence, to pay much attention to the problems of the returning soldiers.

While a war is still going on, the soldiers are told or convince themselves that everything will be different once it is over, that they will be rewarded with jobs, and homes, and appreciation by a grateful government and people. They are almost always disappointed. Prime Minister Lloyd George campaigned in 1918 on the election promise that he would 'make Britain a fit country for heroes to live in'.[10] It did not happen. Within a couple of years, the country was hit by an economic slump which left many of them without jobs or proper homes. The victory of the Labour Party in the British election of 1945 led many soldiers to believe that this time it would be different. The new government did indeed create full employment, a tax-funded universal National Health Service, and a cradle-to-grave welfare state. But although Labour fulfilled its promises, Britain after the war was a very poor country. Housing was scarce, not least because so much had been destroyed by German bombing. The national finances were in disarray. Food rationing did not finally end until July 1954. The promises to the veterans were largely fulfilled, but at a miserable level.

The soldiers who returned from Afghanistan were just as convinced that their government had promised them jobs, homes, medical care, benefits in kind, and cash. But because the Soviet Union was on the verge of political and economic collapse, many veterans found it hard to get even the things they were entitled to. The financial benefits were inadequate, and homes and jobs were few and far between as factories shut down and workers were laid off. Artificial limbs were crude or

non-existent. So were even simple things like wheelchairs. Veterans found it hard to cope with the psychological trauma of battle, or kick the habit of drugs and violence acquired in Afghanistan. Some broke with their wives and girlfriends. Some took to crime. Most did in the end find their way back into civilian life. But all felt some sense of betrayal. 'The boys had lived through so much over there, they'd looked death in the eye, they'd lost their friends ... Then they came home to our everyday, not very cheerful life, and their raw nerves ... felt all the falsehood, the hypocrisy, the indifference, the gross prosperity of some and the bitter poverty of others. And they were hurt, too, because no one cared about what they had been through, about their physical and spiritual wounds. That's when they began to idealise the past.'[11]

In February 1980, just after the war began, the government increased the wages and improved the pensions of regular soldiers and provided for the families of those who had died. It made no specific provision for conscripts. If the soldier became an invalid, he might qualify for the same benefits as an invalid from the Second World War, but by 1980 these had become quite inadequate. Otherwise he qualified only for the even less generous benefits available to those who had suffered an injury at work.

Another decision followed two years later which specifically covered soldiers and civilians in Afghanistan and their families 'for the successful execution of tasks set by the Government of the USSR'. It did not mention that these 'tasks' were military. It provided pensions, medical services, housing, transport, and so on, similar to those granted to veterans of the Second World War, though more limited in scope. There was less to these improvements than met the eye. In the first place the benefits were not at all generous. They were paid according to rank. An officer got a one-off grant equivalent to three months' pay. A soldier who had served beyond his term got five hundred roubles. A conscript got three hundred roubles. Invalids got half that amount, but they were given a month in a sanatorium after coming out of hospital. Benefits were also set for the families of the dead, whether they were soldiers or civilians. But this was a framework decision only, and had to be supplemented with a whole raft of executive regulations. These were not published, and local authorities were often either ignorant of them



or ignored them.[12] So the veterans stumbled into a wall of bureaucratic confusion and obfuscation. Unhelpful officials would say, 'It wasn't me who sent you to Afghanistan,' to justify their refusal to give the veterans the benefits to which they thought they were entitled.

By now the press was weighing in openly. In 1987 *Pravda* wrote of the difficulties veterans faced at the hands of their fellow citizens, who themselves were short of money, proper medical care, and adequate accommodation, and saw little reason why the queues should be jumped by men who had not, after all, been fighting in a real war. An opinion poll of veterans conducted by *Komsomolskaya Pravda* reported that 71 per cent of the veterans thought that the benefits existed only on paper.[13] The veterans still found it hard to discover their rights. And there was no coherent administrative mechanism to administer the benefits properly, no one-stop shop. The veterans had to traipse from one bureaucratic office to the next in order to get what they were entitled to.

In February 1989 the Afgantsy were given the formal status of 'Warrior-Internationalists', a term first applied to the foreign volunteers who fought on the Soviet side during the civil war of 1917–23, and then to the Soviet soldiers who fought in the Spanish and Chinese civil wars, and on the side of 'progressive' regimes in Cuba, Korea, Angola, Ethiopia, Vietnam, and elsewhere. An appropriate campaign medal was issued. It consisted of a five-pointed star on a gold laurel wreath. In the centre was a handshake, and under it a shield, as a symbol of the defensive nature of the operation. None of this satisfied the Afgantsy, who wanted to be given the same status as veterans of the Second World War.[14]

Housing was perhaps the worst nightmare of all. When a veteran killed himself because he had been unable to get anywhere to live, one of the trade union officials involved commented, 'I understand what it was like for him. When the boys were fighting in Afghanistan they were probably promised the earth. But the factory can't just provide an apartment at the drop of a hat. The necessary regulation doesn't exist. And then you have to understand that we have to build the houses ourselves, and with the dreadful new accounting standards we can barely make ends meet. Sasha was the twelfth in the queue. There

were veterans from the Second World War ahead of him, and Afghan veterans too, who had arrived in the factory before he got here.'[15]

The Soviet Union had always been a very poor country. There had never been enough wealth to support the general promise of the country's state welfare system to its citizens. With the best will in the world, the promise of special privileges for returning veterans could rarely be fully met in practice. One returning officer recognised the problem: 'The country's level of economic development set the level of social help that the state can give to the various levels of society. If we did not have a housing problem, we would not have a problem finding accommodation for the Afgantsy... It's not a result of a lack of warmth, it's not a result of a lack of attention, it's the result of the problems which exist in the country.'[16]

Not surprisingly, however, few veterans saw it that way. They felt that society had failed to award them even the moral recognition to which they were entitled. The promises that had been made to them were not fulfilled. They had to struggle to get the meagre benefits to which they were entitled. And some civilians grudged them even these.[17]

But one way in which the treatment of the Afgantsy differed from that of the veterans of earlier wars was a direct result of the loosening of the rigid state control which had marked all public activity in the Soviet system. For the first time it became possible for citizens to found their own independent organisations. Towards the end of the war, a number of official and semi-official organisations were set up to help the veterans directly and to bargain with the authorities from a position of greater strength. The importance of this change should not be exaggerated. Some of the new organisations were not very efficient. Some of them were rather corrupt. It sometimes looked as if they were run not so much to benefit their members, but to bring prestige, position, and wealth to their leaders. They were often very close to the authorities.

In 1986 the Komsomol set up a new Administration for Afghan Questions. In April 1990 the Supreme Soviet set up a Committee for Soldier-Internationalists' Affairs: there were thirteen Afgantsy among its members.[18] The Union of Veterans of Afghanistan (SVA) was set up



in 1989 by Alexander Kotenov, the son of a Soviet officer who had spent four years in the Gulag. After being blown up by a mine, and disillusioned by the war, Kotenov became a military historian. By 1991 the SVA claimed to represent more than three hundred thousand Afghan veterans. Kotenov resigned in 1995 in protest against government interference in the organisation's affairs.[19]

The Russian Union of Veterans of Afghanistan (RSFA), was set up as an offshoot of the SVA in November 1990. Those present at the founding congress included General Varennikov, Vice-President Alexander Rutskoi, Metropolitan Pitirim and Chief of Staff General Moiseev. Its first chairman was Yevgeni Lyagin. He was followed at the end of 1991 by Kotenov, and then in 2001 by Frants Klintsevich, a political officer in the 345th Guards Independent Parachute Assault Regiment.

The Russian Fund for Invalids of the War in Afghanistan (RFIVA) was set up in 1991. Its subsequent career was turbulent. Its chairman, Mikhail Likhodei, was assassinated in November 1994. Two years later a subsequent chairman, Sergei Trakhirov, and fourteen others were killed, and twenty-four more wounded, when a bomb exploded as they were laying a wreath at a memorial to the Afgantsy in the Kotlyarovskoe Cemetery in Moscow. The subsequent attempt to bring the perpetrators to justice was murky and only partly successful. One suspect was still standing trial in the summer of 2007.[20] After these excitements the RFIVA was renamed the All Russian Social Organisation for Invalids of the War in Afghanistan (OOOIVA). Such stories were not uncommon in the Yeltsin years, when ambitious and ruthless men were fighting – literally – to the death to get their hands on the spoils of the failed Soviet state.

The Boevoe Bratstvo, the Brotherhood of Arms, was set up under General Gromov in 1997. With close links to the authorities, it became one of the most influential veterans' organisations in the new century. It joined the Internet age with enthusiasm, setting up its own national and regional websites, which it claimed were the largest of their kind in Russia.

Yeltsin gave the veterans' organisations special privileges – tax breaks, commercial privileges, customs exemptions on alcohol,

tobacco, and oil products, access to foreign currency, sanatoriums, and commercial enterprises worth millions of roubles – which had become available through his policies of 'privatisation'. Bodies such as the National Sporting Fund were similarly privileged, and the practice was one more sign of the collapse and fragmentation of the state. In effect the state handed over to the private sector its responsibilities for those who had fought in its wars. In the chaotic and corrupt conditions of the early 1990s, all this was a licence to print money. A small number of people at the top of the Afghan veterans' organisations got very rich. Only 24 per cent – and according to some calculations, only 9 per cent – of the money actually reached the disabled ex-servicemen for whom it was intended.[21]

This dubious system began to be rethought even before the explosion in the cemetery. In 1995 a revised Veterans' Law finally awarded the Afgantsy the full status and title of 'veterans'.[22] This law gave veterans of all classes fairly broad social benefits, but unfortunately these were no more adequately funded than the benefits that preceded them. Matters were further confused by the Russian government's decision in 2004 to convert benefits in kind – bus passes, holiday vouchers, and the like – into financial payments of dubious value in an inflating economy. The reform of local government in 2006 reallocated responsibility for the administration of benefits yet again. The rapid growth in the Russian economy after 2000 did, however, significantly improve the state's ability to meet its financial obligations to its citizens.

Because these veterans' organisations saw it as one of their tasks to encourage patriotism and respect for the armed forces, especially among the young, their place in President Putin's more assertive Russia was assured. Some of their leaders, such as Frants Klintsevich, went into national politics; by 2007 he was deputy leader of the pro-Putin United Russia faction in the Duma, and Chairman of the Duma Committee which dealt with the problems of pensioners and veterans. In the autumn of 2007 several of the veterans' organisations supported the electoral campaign of Putin and United Russia without inhibition.[23]

Soldiers returning from any war have to adjust to a world which cannot



understand what they have been through, to people who have not been there, and who are not interested or interested only in a legend of heroism, rather than the traumatic reality of battle. The soldiers have seen horrible things and some of them have done horrible things. They suffer nightmares, they quarrel with their wives, they commit violence in the home and on the street, they drop to the ground at the sound of a car backfiring, they are especially haunted by the death of children.[24] A month or a year may separate these reactions from the events that trigger them off. The sufferers may be able to fend off the memories by shutting down their emotions, by becoming emotionally numb. The condition may last for months or even years. Because they have been in the military, with its culture of heroism, discipline and masculine toughness, they find it hard to talk of their experiences or seek help outside their own circle of fellow veterans.[25]

The suffering is not confined to those who have fought and killed. British peacekeepers in Bosnia, who fought only in self-defence if at all, showed many of the same symptoms. So do civilians who have been involved in catastrophic events – in traffic accidents, natural disasters, or as victims of violent crime. Since the 1980s, the phenomenon has been given a name: post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD.

American studies show that 20–30 per cent of the American soldiers who had fought in the deeply unpopular Vietnam War suffered from PTSD, compared with only 15 per cent of those who fought in the first Gulf War in 1991, which was popularly perceived as just and necessary.[26] American soldiers returning from the second Iraq war after 2003 were statistically at greater risk – from suicide, murder, assault, drunken driving, and drug use – than they were while they were fighting there.[27]

But even when a nation believes it has embarked on a 'just war', the rationale fades as the carnage mounts, and the soldiers no longer fight for a cause, but to survive and to help their comrades do the same. The victorious British soldiers who came home from the Second World War were heroes in theory. In practice they were often resented by civilians who had themselves experienced real privation and the danger of violent death from the air. Jobs were scarce, or incompatible with the skills and positions that the veterans believed their service entitled them

to. The divorce rate in Britain soared by fifteen times between 1935 and 1947, as couples separated by war failed to rebuild their shattered lives. Violent crime increased by two and a half times in the ten years to 1948. Sexual offences tripled. The newspapers were full of stories of soldiers murdering their wives. The veterans turned to the familiar warmth of contacts with surviving comrades, rather than family, as the first line of defence against a civilian world they perceived as unwelcoming, even hostile. As time went by, most of them slowly settled back into civilian and domestic life. Comrades drifted apart and comradeship was replaced by nostalgia for a generalised picture of a heroic war. But the symptoms could return years and even decades after peace had come. As late as 2001, one in five of the British veterans of the Second World War still displayed war-related psychological distress.[28]

In Russia it was called the 'Afghan syndrome' and it was still around twenty years after the war had ended; in 2009 a popular song by the Siberian rock group Grazhdanskaya Oborona (Civil Defence) described the symptoms rather well.[29] For the veterans of Afghanistan, the inevitable feeling of 'them and us' was exacerbated because many of their fellow citizens now regarded the war as dirty and unjustified. Like those who fought in Vietnam, they had found themselves fighting against an enemy often invisible and taking many forms. Now they were called baby-killers and murderers, sadists and torturers, or simpletons who had been too stupid to understand the crimes they were committing, by those who had stood aside from the horrors of a war which many of the soldiers themselves had concluded made no sense. One foreigner remembered eating in a restaurant as two perfectly sober and polite young army officers with combat decorations were chased out by the *maître d'hôtel*, who assured him that this was not the sort of establishment where 'that sort' could expect to eat.[30]

These were not only the sophisticated attitudes of the urban intelligentsia in Moscow and Leningrad and the big cities. The veterans faced hostility in the small provincial towns as well. When Vitali Krivenko returned to his hometown in August 1987, people who had known him before treated him as if he was somehow abnormal. He broke with his girlfriend because she assumed he was a drug addict like everyone else who had been in Afghanistan. Drinking companions who had not been



in the war would ask him if he was liable to go berserk if he took a bit too much. He learned to keep quiet about the fact that he had been blown up and suffered concussion when he applied for a job: employers did not like to hire Afgantsy, because they were regarded as difficult, always demanding the privileges they had been promised but had not received. He ended up briefly in prison for hitting a policeman.

The statistics are incomplete and hard to interpret. Something can be gained from the anecdotal evidence. In 2008 Alexander Gergel found that among those who had served with him in Bakharak, one had died of drug and alcohol abuse, one had been the victim of an armed robbery, and one had become a contract killer and was serving a ten-year sentence in prison. This was not a large proportion; the remainder had more or less adapted to civilian life. 'But after a drink or two, as the evening wore on, one realised that something had broken in the soul of almost all of us. I think one might express it this way: life had forcibly transformed us after its own pattern, and none of us had become what we would have wanted to become if we had not passed through Afghanistan. Whether we were better or worse is another story.'[31]

Though there was no nationwide study, individual regions, local veterans' organisations, and local newspapers began to set up their own websites about their young men who had served in Afghanistan. The newspaper *Voronezhskaya Gazeta* reported there were 5,200 Afghan veterans in Voronezh. By the summer of 1996 seventy-five had died, half as a result of accidents, one-third had been struck down by illness, and one in seven had committed suicide. Twelve years later, more than five hundred had died – one-tenth of all those who had returned from the war. The paper claimed that the young men died not so much because of what they had been through in Afghanistan, but because no provision had been made for their psychological rehabilitation, because they had been unable to afford proper medical treatment, because many of them had been unable to find work or a decent place to live.[32]

But the amount of psychological rehabilitation available for the soldiers was limited partly by the lack of resources and partly because the concept of trauma was alien. If the soldiers who fought against Hitler

could survive without going to the shrink, why should the Afgantsy be different? 'Trauma' was an alien, perhaps an American idea.

Nevertheless, a thin but native Russian tradition did exist. The first work on soldiers suffering from psychological trauma was done in Russia after the Russo-Japanese war in 1904–5 by psychiatrists in the Academy of Military Medicine. The results were largely ignored in the Soviet period and the 40th Army took no psychiatrists with them when they went into Afghanistan. The first specialists went there in the mid-1980s. The symptoms they found among the Afgantsy were much the same as the Americans had identified after Vietnam: a sense of guilt at what they had done, a horror at what they had seen, the same self-reproach that they had survived while their comrades had died. Some specialists reckoned that as many as one in two Afghan veterans needed some sort of help. At first the symptoms were psychological: irritability, aggressiveness, insomnia, nightmares, thoughts of suicide. After five years many would be suffering from physical as well as psychological consequences: heart disease, ulcers, bronchial asthma, neurodermatitis.

The trouble was that, compared with the United States, there were nothing like the facilities available in Russia to treat the traumatised veterans. There were only six specialised rehabilitation centres for the whole of Russia, and these had to deal with people traumatised not only by Afghanistan, but by their experiences of dealing with the nuclear accident in Chernobyl in 1986, and by the fighting in Chechnya, and other places of violent conflict.[33]

One of those who tried to explain the phenomenon scientifically was Professor Mikhail Reshetnikov, the Rector of the East European Institute for Psychoanalysis in St Petersburg. He had himself been a professional military medical officer from 1972 and was posted to Afghanistan in 1986. He sent a paper to the General Staff, based on interviews with two thousand soldiers, which set out the problems from which the 40th Army was suffering: from the inadequacy of the army's supply system to the moral and psychological training of the soldiers. The report had no effect, and he was asked by his superiors why he had deliberately set out to gather facts which brought shame on the Soviet Army. From 1988 to 1993 he directed several programmes for



the Ministry of Defence on the behaviour of people affected by local wars, and man-made and natural catastrophes. After retiring from the military he became a member of the Association of Afghan Veterans.

In an article published on the Afghan veterans' website in 2002, Reshetnikov argued that the way Russians surrounded their military past with an aura of heroic myth had a political, a moral, and a psychological function. It helped to compensate for the horrors not only of the Afghan and Chechen wars, but of the Great Patriotic War of 1941–5 itself, the foundation event in all modern Russian patriotic myths. He wrote of some of the dreadful things which had happened in Afghanistan: the rebel sniper captured and burned alive by the soldier whose comrade he had killed, the small boy hurled from a helicopter, the young girl raped by a whole platoon, the scores of peaceful civilians shot, the villages destroyed out of revenge. His conclusions were stark. All wars lead to an 'epidemic of amorality', he argued. Genuine heroism and self-sacrificial comradeship do of course exist. But they are always accompanied, in all wars and in all armies, by murder, torture, cruelty to prisoners, rape, and violent looting, especially when the army is operating outside its own territory. The sense of guilt, the need to atone for what they have done, comes to the soldiers later. It affects all their personal relationships, especially within the family. 'Their memories are poisoned by their criminal and semi-criminal experience, and they become a real threat not only to themselves but to society in general.' Not surprisingly, his article infuriated many of the Afghan veterans who read it. They deeply resented the implication that they had all been criminals to a greater or lesser extent, and they expressed their anger in colourful terms on their website.

### *The Mood Settles Down*

Attempts after 1989 by journalists and liberal politicians to get at the truth of the Afghan war produced a furious reaction not only from the veterans, but from their families as well. When Svetlana Aleksievich published her book in 1990 about the men and women who served in Afghanistan, she was overwhelmed with criticism. 'You wanted to demonstrate the futility and wickedness of war, but you don't realise that in doing so you insult those who took part in it, including a lot of

innocent boys.' 'How could you? How dare you cover our boys' graves with such dirt? ... They were heroes, heroes, heroes!' 'My only son was killed there. The only comfort I had was that I'd raised a hero, but according to you he wasn't a hero at all, but a murderer and aggressor.' 'How much longer are you going to go on describing us as mentally ill, or rapists, or junkies?'

The veterans were particularly infuriated to be told that the war had been a 'mistake'. 'Why all this talk of mistakes? And do you really think that all these exposés and revelations in the press are a help? You're depriving our youth of their heroic heritage.' 'I don't want to hear about any political mistakes ... Give me my legs back if it was all a mistake.' 'We were sent to Afghanistan by a nation which sanctioned the war,' one woman said, 'and returned to find that same nation had rejected it. What offends me is the way we've simply been erased from the public mind. What was only recently described as one's "international duty" is now considered stupidity.' 'They put the blame on a few men who were already dead [Brezhnev, Andropov, Chernenko]. And everyone else was innocent – apart from us! Yes, we used our weapons to kill. That's what they handed them out for. Did you expect us to come home angels?' And more calmly: 'Of course there were criminals, addicts and thugs. Where aren't there? Those who fought in Afghanistan must, absolutely, be seen as victims who need psychological rehabilitation.'[34]

What the veterans had found almost the hardest of all to bear was the contrast between the way they had been treated and the reception – at least as it was preserved in popular memory – which their fathers and grandfathers had received when they returned as heroes from their victory over Hitler. That too began to change. President Putin moved to restore a sense of pride in Russia's history of the twentieth century, the history of the Soviet Union. There was a new emphasis on patriotism and on the glories of Russia's military past. The war in Afghanistan began to be reinvented as a heroic episode in which the soldiers had done their military duty and defended the interests of the Motherland. On Putin's instructions, a memorial was erected to the Warrior-Internationalists in 2004, in an alleyway of the grandiose war memorial complex commissioned by Brezhnev to stand on the Poklonnaya Gora, the shallow hill on the outskirts of Moscow where Napoleon waited in vain for the city fathers to bring him the keys of the city.[35] An infantry fighting vehicle, painted in desert camouflage, was placed beside it as a modest addition to the military hardware from the Great Patriotic War which was spread across the rest of the site.



The mood started to settle as the controversy over its causes and conduct began to die down. Russian commentators moved on from the endless argument about who was guilty for the Soviet debacle. A whole new dimension entered the discussion with the American invasion of Afghanistan at the end of 2001.[36] The veterans saw the Americans mirroring their own experience and their own mistakes. There was sympathy for the soldiers fighting over the same difficult ground. There was some inevitable *Schadenfreude* as the NATO campaign increasingly bogged down, much tempered by the thought that it was certainly not in the Russian interest to see NATO fail and leave an unstable Afghanistan to their vulnerable south.

### *The Internet*

Four or five years into the new century, another important thing happened. The veterans discovered the Internet, which was beginning to penetrate deeply into Russian society and giving a voice to people who had previously been unable to make themselves heard. The Internet enabled the veterans to bypass the official organisations and make direct contact with one another, to seek out their former comrades. They posted their memoirs, their poems, their short stories, their novels on their own site, Art of War. The quality of many of the literary contributions was high and often remarkably objective: there was comparatively little macho boasting. And the messages did not come only from the intellectuals and the educated. Many came from simple people, whose grasp of spelling and syntax was not always entirely secure. Through the Internet, the veterans began to put together lists of those they had served with, to write a first version of their regimental histories, and to organise their own reunions. Among the most active were the men from the 860th Independent Motor-rifle Regiment and the 345th Guards Independent Parachute Assault Regiment. In the summer of 2009 the veterans of the 860th Independent Motor-rifle Regiment, who by now had tracked down over two thousand of their former comrades, held

their third national reunion in a sanatorium outside Moscow. It was attended by men of all ranks, some of whom had been looking for one another for two decades and more. Many brought their wives and children. Colonel Antonenko, who had once commanded the regiment, was there. So were Private Kostya Sneyerov and his commander Yuri Vygovski, who had named his son Konstantin after his former subordinate. They drank the 'Third Toast' in memory of those who had not returned. And they vowed to continue their meetings in future years.[5]

*The Twentieth Anniversary*

The twentieth anniversary of the withdrawal was celebrated all over Russia in February 2009. In Moscow the celebrations began with a vast ceremony organised in the Olympic Stadium by the Moscow branch of the Boevoe Bratstvo. Some five thousand people attended, veterans, wives and girlfriends, many teenagers, and a huge paratrooper, well over six feet tall and chunky to match. There were interminable patriotic speeches, endless noisy sentimental songs, and a dozen cars were given away as prizes to selected veterans – an ostentatious and very expensive display. Some thought the money might have been better spent on the many veterans still living in poverty.

Sunday, 15 February – the day of the anniversary itself – was cold, with wet sleet and snow falling thickly. The official wreath was laid at the tomb of the Unknown Soldier by the Kremlin, to the accompaniment of some fine marching and a spirited rendering of the old Soviet national anthem. Three or four hundred veterans, including Alexander Gergel and his comrades from the 860th Independent Motor-rifle Regiment, then carried the red banners of the 40th Army from the Kremlin through the snow and slush to the monument to the Warrior-Internationalist, the Afganets, on the Poklonnaya Gora. There they were addressed by their generals: Ruslan Aushev, who had fought his way up the Pandsher Valley, and become a Hero of the Soviet Union and Governor of his homeland, the North Caucasian republic of Ingushetia; and Valeri Vostrotin, another Hero of the Soviet Union, who had stormed Amin's palace and led the 354th Guards Independent Parachute Assault Regiment during Operation *Magistral*. The speeches were sober and mercifully short: Aushev joked that if the politicians had been to staff college and planned the thing properly, the withdrawal would have taken place at a more clement season, and the veterans would not now be standing in the snow. The soldiers, the speakers said, had defended the interests of their country and done what the Motherland had asked of them. They had gone to help the Afghans; and when the Afghans had wanted them no longer, they had left. Frants Klintsevich, the former political officer who was now the Chairman of the Russian Union of Veterans of Afghanistan, said that it had been a bad peace; but a bad peace was better than a good war. The mother of a fallen soldier made a restrained and dignified speech: the Afghan war should be the last war in which Russian boys died. She had forgotten Chechnya.

That evening a grand ceremony was held in the Kremlin. The veterans could feel that after two decades their service and their sufferings in Afghanistan were at last receiving some kind of recognition – even if the state for which they had fought no longer existed.

# EPILOGUE: THE RECKONING

In December 1989 the Congress of People's Deputies of the Soviet Union passed a resolution which said that the decision to intervene in Afghanistan was 'deserving of moral and political condemnation'. In subsequent years right-wing politicians and leaders of veterans' organisations such as Frants Klintsevich attempted to get the resolution formally overturned, or argued that it was not intended as an outright condemnation.[1] But however contorted the wording, it goes rather further than many other countries have done towards apologising for a failed war.

The death and destruction which passed over Afghanistan in the years after 1979 were not unprecedented. When a war of intervention is combined with a local civil war, and especially when one side has an overwhelming technical superiority, the disproportion between the casualties of the two sides is very large. The figures for civilian casualties in such wars are impossible to determine with any accuracy, so that the proportions cannot be accurately drawn. By no means all the blame can be laid on the foreigners: very many Afghans and Vietnamese and Algerians were killed by their own countrymen. But however imprecise the figures, one thing is sure. In a war of intervention the local people die at a much greater rate than the soldiers of the invading force; and



the chances of winning hearts and mind – the core of all counter-insurgency theory – is much reduced (See Annex 4, 'Indo-China, Vietnam, Algeria, Afghanistan: A Comparison', page 348.)

For the Soviet Union it was nevertheless, by most measures, a comparatively small war; those who later argued that Russia had lost a whole generation of young men were greatly exaggerating.[2] Some 620,000 young men and a few young women served in Afghanistan in the course of nine years. Of these 525,000 were in the armed forces; the remainder were from the KGB's frontier and special forces and the Ministry of the Interior. This was a mere 3.4 per cent of those eligible for military service. Throughout the war in Afghanistan most Soviet soldiers continued to serve in the Far East or, above all, in Europe, where the main threat lay.

The official figure for the dead was 15,051: 2.4 per cent of those who served. The figure includes those from the KGB's frontier forces, those who went missing in action, and those who died of illness or wounds, including those who died after they left the army (about 5.5 per cent of the total) or in accidents (about 12 per cent). Fifty-two of the dead were women, four of them warrant officers in the military, the rest civilians.

Soldiers from all the peoples of the Soviet Union fought in Afghanistan, from the largest group, the Russians, to some of the very smallest. There were Soviet Germans, Poles, Greeks, Romanians, one Gypsy, one Finn, one Hungarian, and one Czech among the dead. The burden of the war was not evenly distributed, but 52.7 people were killed per million of the Soviet population as a whole. The peoples of Central Asia suffered proportionately the most – 65 killed for every million of the population – the story that Central Asians were unwilling to fight their co-religionists in Afghanistan is a myth. For the Slavs as a whole, the figure was 53.5 per million; for the Russians 51.1 dead per million. The peoples of the Caucasus and the Baltic States believed that they were deliberately targeted for service in Afghanistan because the Kremlin thought they were politically unreliable. The figures show that this was another myth: only 25.8 per million Caucasians and 17 per million Balts died in Afghanistan.

Apart from the dead, more than fifty thousand were wounded, and more than ten thousand became invalids. Many others suffered various

forms of post-traumatic stress disorder, took to crime or drugs, or were unable to hold down a permanent job. For these victims of the war the available statistics are thin, misleading, or both. No one disputes the huge overall figure of 469,685 – 88 per cent of all those who served – who fell sick or were wounded during the war.[3]

Western intelligence reports at the time produced wild casualty figures extrapolated from anecdotal evidence. One such estimate was that 20–25,000 Soviet soldiers had died by the end of 1981 and 50,000 by the end of 1983.[4] But the Defence Ministry and the Russian regions produced Books of Remembrance with details of each dead soldier. Local websites tracked the fates of local boys who had served and died. Interest in the issue inside Russia eventually died away, and the official figures were more or less accepted as the best that were likely to become available.

Large claims were made, not least by the mujahedin themselves, about the contribution that the war in Afghanistan made to the collapse of the Soviet Union. In spring 2002 Burhanuddin Rabbani said in Mazar-i Sharif, 'We forced the Communists out of our country, we can force all invaders out of holy Afghanistan ... Had it not been for the jihad, the whole world would still be in the Communist grip. The Berlin Wall fell because of the wounds which we inflicted on the Soviet Union, and the inspiration we gave all oppressed people. We broke the Soviet Union up into fifteen parts. We liberated people from Communism. Jihad led to a free world. We saved the world because Communism met its grave here in Afghanistan!'[5]

The reality was more complicated. The war was an economic and military burden on the Soviet Union, but not a particularly large one measured against the country's overall commitments.[6] The failure in Afghanistan did reinforce the lack of confidence of the Soviet people in their government which was growing throughout the 1980s. But that dissatisfaction was also fed by many other factors: the humiliating spectacle of one gerontocrat succeeding another at the head of government which preceded Gorbachev's election in 1985; the revelation of incompetence and government deceit which followed the explosion at Chernobyl nuclear plant in April 1986; the strains of the arms competition with the United States; an economic malaise which turned into an economic catastrophe towards the end of the decade; the uncertainties and upheavals engendered by Gorbachev's own reforms. All these were the symptoms that the Soviet economic and political system was no longer viable. It was collapsing even without the contribution of the war in Afghanistan.

The Soviet Union was thus damaged not so much by the material losses of the war as by the political costs both domestic and foreign. Domestic opposition to the war was never on the scale that it reached in the United States during the war in Vietnam: that would have been inconceivable, given the nature of the Soviet political system. But the early realisation that the invasion had been a mistake, the moral revulsion which began to be felt by some people even inside the government and the army, the anger of ordinary people as they started to realise what was happening – all this increased pressure on the politicians to find a way out of the quagmire.

For the Afghans, of course, it was not a small war at all. For the mujahedin it was a battle for national dignity and national liberation in which they were prepared to fight – literally – to the death. The casualty figures we have are more or less inaccurate guesses, often put into circulation for propaganda reasons. But probably somewhere between 600,000 and 1.5 million Afghans were killed in the Soviet war.[7] Millions more were driven from their home to seek refuge in Pakistan and Iran. The complex relationships which governed the Afghan way of life were overturned almost beyond repair. But the people of Afghanistan, like the people of Vietnam, had one irreducible advantage over the invader: they were going to stay, while the foreigner would eventually leave. As the saying goes, the foreigners had the watches, but the locals had the time.

Russians and Americans drew the illuminating comparison with the American war in Vietnam both during the Soviet war in Afghanistan and afterwards. The Cold War conditioned the decisions of both governments. Both went to war, on a dubious interpretation of international law, in the belief that they were defending their country's vital interests. Their immediate aims were similar: to protect a client and to deny a strategic territory to the other. Both had more grandiose aims:

to build in a distant country a political, social, and economic system similar to their own. Neither understood what they were getting into. Both thought that they would be able to shore up their local ally – the PDPA government in Kabul and the South Vietnamese government in Saigon – so that they could hand over responsibility for the security of the country and then leave. Both believed that their modern military machine should prevail without too much difficulty over the ragtag guerrilla force which faced them.

And indeed the failures were not military. Neither the Soviet army in Afghanistan nor the American army in Vietnam was defeated: they held the ground and eventually withdrew in good order. The failures in both cases were failures of intelligence, of judgement, and of assessment. Both the Americans and the Russians set themselves unattainable strategic goals. Neither were able to achieve their main political objective: a friendly, stable regime which would share their ideological and political goals. Their protégés were overthrown and the peoples of Vietnam and Afghanistan rejected the political models they were offered. Some among the military in both Russia and America believed that the failure to prevail was the result of the spinelessness of the public and the press, and the weakness, even the treachery, of the politicians. But the entry of the mujahedin into Kabul, like the entry of the North Vietnamese into Saigon, marked a decisive outcome to both wars of a kind which Clausewitz, for one, would have recognised instantly.[8]

Western propaganda successfully portrayed Soviet behaviour in Afghanistan as uniquely brutal. But in Vietnam as well as in Afghanistan the armies went in for the casual and indiscriminate destruction of villages, crops, animals, and people. They used massive firepower in an attempt to overwhelm a ruthless and elusive enemy who never presented them with a target worthy of their sophisticated modern weapons. The Russians were accused of using chemical weapons in Afghanistan, but the accusations petered out. The Americans used the chemical Agent Orange to destroy forests and crops but also killed or disabled large numbers of Vietnamese. The Russians used aerial bombing on a large scale, but never on the scale of the massive American B-52 strikes against North Vietnam. More bombs were dropped by the Americans on Laos than were dropped on Germany by the RAF and the US Air Force combined.[9]



Both wars lasted for nine years. But the Vietnam War was on a much larger scale than the war in Afghanistan. More than 2.5 million Americans passed through Vietnam: nearly five times as many as the number of Soviets who served in Afghanistan. Nearly four times as many died. Many more Vietnamese than Afghans died – perhaps between one and a half to six times as many, depending on which among a number of unsatisfactory figures one chooses.[10] Like the war in Afghanistan, the war in Vietnam was accompanied and followed by a brutal civil war in which large numbers also perished.

This kind of moral calculus is not very fruitful. There is little to choose between the way either war was fought. But there was one essential difference between the two wars – the distinction that Zbigniew Brzezinski drew in his advice to President Carter the day after the Soviet invasion began. The victors in Vietnam, the government in Hanoi, were coherent, dedicated, ruthless, and efficient. At great cost they were able to impose order on their country, which in the next thirty years became increasingly prosperous and open to the outside world. The mujahedin never achieved anything like that coherence and discipline, and their entry into Kabul was only the prelude to more decades of war and foreign intervention, which made it almost impossible to repair the physical, social, moral, and political damage which had initially been caused by the Communist regime and the Soviet intervention. The Vietnamese were able to enjoy the fruits of their victory. The Afghans were not.

Perhaps it was because of the horrors that followed that the Afghans did not in the long run seem to nurture a grudge against the Russians. Leonid Shebarshin returned to Herat only nine months after the 40th Army had pulled out, expecting to be met with fear, hatred, and hostility. Not a bit of it, his Afghan interlocutors told him: you lived with one lot of feelings while the fighting was going on, but once the war was over you had to forget the bad things that had happened.[11] By the time the journalist Vladimir Snegirev returned to Afghanistan in 2003, people were already beginning to compare the Russians favourably to the new invaders who had arrived in 2001. 'They seemed to

have forgotten our carpet-bombing, the minefields, the manhunts, the looting, in a word everything which, alas, accompanied the presence of the "limited military contingent".'[12]

Not long after that Russian veterans began to return as tourists to the places where they had fought two decades earlier. To accommodate them, the enterprising Sergei Zharov set up his own guidebook on the web, *The Russians are Back*, advising his countrymen on transport, visas, places to visit, and places to avoid.[13] Igor Yamshchikov went with a friend to Kabul in 2006, and then drove along the road to Jalalabad, filming the guard posts where they had served in 1981–2 and posting the results on YouTube.[14] Andrei Kuznetsov and two comrades from the 345th Guards Independent Parachute Assault Regiment also visited Kabul in 2006. They hired a cab for $100, drove on from Bagram to the Salang Pass, and put up a memorial stone there. When they got home they too posted their stories on the Internet.

In the spring of 2009 Dmitri Fedorov, a former senior sergeant with the 860th Independent Motor-rifle Regiment, returned to Afghanistan through Osh and Ishkashim, and along the mountain roads of Badakhshan to Bakharak and Faisabad – the same route that the regiment had taken when it entered Afghanistan nearly thirty years earlier. Much had changed in the meanwhile. The tracks along which the regiment had struggled with so much difficulty had been replaced with decent roads. The town of Faisabad had nearly tripled in size and now boasted a proper hotel, which belonged to the former mujahedin commander Basir. A suburb now bordered the two or three miles which had separated the town and the regiment's base. The base itself was unrecognisable. The barren terrain where the soldiers had vainly attempted to sow trees was now a flourishing oasis with gardens and houses, surrounded by Lebanese cedars. Fedorov and his colleagues talked to those who had fought against them. To the men who had been on the same side, men from KhAD and the Tsarandoi, they handed out certificates marking the twentieth anniversary of the Soviet withdrawal. One thing had not changed, said Fedorov. The region was no more under the control of the central government than it had been during the Soviet time. In and around Faisabad, Basir and the other local potentates were in charge, as they had always been.



Afghans told these tales not only to Russians, whom they might have wanted to flatter, but to other visitors, whom they did not. When I visited Afghanistan in September 2008 – a national of one of the foreign countries now fighting there – I was told by almost every Afghan I met that things were better under the Russians. The Russians were not so stand-offish as the Americans, who had no interest in Afghanistan itself, and who looked like Martians with their elaborate equipment, their menacing body armour, and their impenetrable Ray-Bans when they briefly emerged from the high walls behind which they barricaded themselves. The Russians, I was told, had built the elements of industry, whereas now most of the aid money simply ended up in the wrong pockets in the wrong countries. In the Russian time everyone had had work; now things were getting steadily worse. The last Communist president, Najibullah, had been one of the best of Afghanistan's recent rulers: more popular than Daud, the equal of Zahir Shah. Video recordings of Najibullah's speeches were being sold round Kabul, with their warnings – which turned out to be true – that there would be civil war if he were overthrown. People were discreetly dismissive of President Karzai, whom they said was a puppet of the foreigners. Sher Ahmad Maladani, a mujahedin commander in Herat who fought the Communists and the Russians for a decade and the Taliban after them, told me that if Najibullah instead of Karmal had taken over in 1979, the country would not be in its present mess. He too preferred the Russians. The Russians were strong and brave, he said. They fought man to man on the ground, and they used their weapons only when their enemy was armed. They never killed women and children. But the Americans were afraid to fight on the ground and their bombing was indiscriminate.

As history much of this was travesty. But it did seem to indicate that the latest attempt to help the Afghans to help themselves was having little more success than its predecessor.

Leaders take their countries into foreign wars for reasons of ambition, greed, moral or messianic fervour, or on a calculation of national advantage which may or may not be flawed.

The generals manage the wars as well as they can. The best try to husband the lives of their soldiers and to keep them under proper

control. When it is all over, they ransack the archives and write their memoirs, to carve out their niche in history, to justify the decisions they took, and sometimes to take a sideswipe at a former colleague.

The soldiers who do the actual fighting come home having seen and done terrible things which return to haunt them. The stories of heroism and comradeship help them to manage their memories and give meaning to what they have been through. Some claim that the war years were the best of their lives. Many more say nothing, and go to their graves without telling even their nearest and dearest what it was really like.

So it is after all wars. So it was after the Soviet war in Afghanistan.